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FALL
1948

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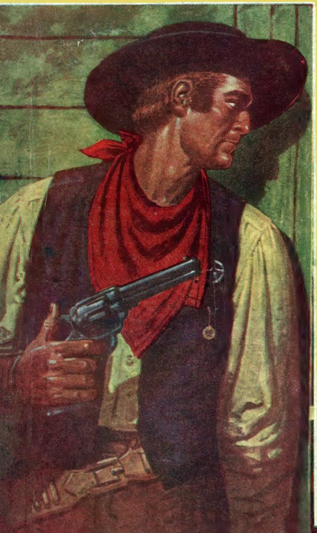

DESPERADO
by *WILLIAM HOPSON*

INDIAN GAMBLE
by *JOHN DI SILVESTRO*

☆

BIG MAN
by *GUY ARCHETTE*

THE FURRINERS
by *H. B. HICKEY*

"DON'T CALL ME PODNUH..."
by *BERKELEY LIVINGSTON*

LIMPY'S GULCH
by *ALEXANDER BLADE*

See Back Cover
AMERICAN INDIANS

GUNS ACROSS THE DAKOTAS
95,000-WORD NOVEL by LATHROP W. HULL

VOLUME 1
NUMBER 2

FALL
1948

Mammoth Western Quarterly Reissue

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MAY 1948

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VOLUME 4 NUMBER 5

All Stories Complete

DESPERADO (Novel—70,000) . . . . by William Hopson 8
Illustrated by Joseph Wirt Tillotson
Jude changed from farmer to cowboy to killer after he met Blackie, but no matter what he did there was always a sense of honor and loyalty . . .

BIG MAN (Short—8,200) . . . . by Guy Archette 136
Illustrated by Ramon Naylor
You can't judge by the looks of a frog, how far it can jump; and just because Cameron was a little man was no reason to feel he couldn't fight!

THE PRICE OF A LEG (Short—6,300) . . . . by John Di Silvestro 154
Illustrated by Rod Ruth
When Whit Black, reprobate and gambler, made his deal with the Lord, he knew that he had to keep his part of the bargain—regardless of the cost!

WE GOTTA BE DIGNIFIED, MAC (Short—6,500) . . . . by Alexander Blade 168
Illustrated by William A. Gray
Porfie shot back and forth across the Border like a Mexican jumping bean and I couldn't do anything about it—not if I wanted a certain girl . . .

BUNKHOUSE PUNCHER (Short—3,900) . . . . by Richard Irving 182
Illustrated by Walter Haskell Hinton
Dave wanted to be a real cowpuncher more than he wanted anything else in the world—and Larkin's crooked tricks couldn't stop him, either . . .

Front cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones, illustrating a scene from the lead novel, "Desperado."

Back cover painting by Walter Haskell Hinton, illustrating the American Indian series—The Iroquois.

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RIDIN' HERD *with the Editor*

THAT favorite of all of us, Bill Hopson, is back with us again! This time it's "Desperado," so sit down for some fine reading. Bill can't do a bad story even if he wants to. It's in his blood to write good Westerns, the kind with the authentic flavor, and automatically when he sits down to his typewriter, the real McCoy comes out. The funny thing about "Desperado" is that it's such a simple story—it's only about a kid who grows up—but he grows up in a hurry! One day he's working his father's farm, the next, he's cleaning his gun barrel. There is none of the false melodrama to this story. It's honest and sincere and like all Hopson's stuff, it's jammed with authentic little details that make it a pleasure and an education to read. That doesn't mean that it's not crammed with fast action—there's not a dead moment in it. From beginning to end, you'll be fascinated with Jude, his problems and how he solves them. When you want to know the Old West, in its grim and bitter reality, read Bill's stuff. Ridin' herd on cattle bound for a railhead takes more than fancy boots and chaps. A ten gallon hat doesn't make a cowboy. Bill Hopson knows this and that's why his stories, like "Desperado" ring with reality and with fact.

SPEAKING of fact and authenticity, Lathrop W. Hull who's coming up fast with a novel shortly, goes out of his way to get the details on a story too. The other day he dropped in the office with a manuscript and a letter from the Winchester people. It seems that he was in doubt about when the rifle, caliber .44, Model 73 came into use. He didn't take any chances. He wrote to the Winchester people and got the correct dope on it. It seems it came out in 1873 as he had suspected, not in 1871 as some one had told him! There is no limit to what the boys will do to get the right dope. It may not mean much as far as the thread of the story goes, but it's satisfying to know that you're not reading a mass of faulty information. The wrong info' doesn't help a story any. What say?

IN THIS issue we're by-passing *The Reader Rides The Range,* which we brought back so recently. We hate to do it because it's such an interesting department judging from the comments we've received, but unfortunately we had to go to press in a hurry with this issue.

"BIG MAN" by Guy Archette is as usual, first-rate. Guy's stuff is no novelty to you and we're sure you'll like this story as much as you have his others. When a good Big Man tangles with a good Little Man the results are unpredictable in spite of what the old saying says!

JOHN DI SILVESTRO comes back again with his "The Price of a Leg." Remember back a few months ago when we gave him his first hit with MW? Well, he tried us again, and again we think he has hit the jackpot. The story has a funny angle. It seems there was an old reprobate gambler who almost lost his leg and he promised the Lord that if he *didn't* lose it, he would go out and preach the Word, which he did, but then . . . that's enough. We have that habit of giving it away.

"WE GOTTA Be Dignified, Mac," by Alexander Blade, is "different" story. This is really off-trail for two reasons. It has a modern setting with the Border Patrol, and it has quite a few "slick" touches. In fact, it was originally aimed at the "slicks" but we got first crack at it, and now we're glad we took it. It is good!

YOUR editor is feeling mighty proud and happy these days. In last month's editorial we raved and ranted for one of the best causes we could think of—the Navahos and their rough situation. The response was so overwhelming from all sources that we're sure it is going to be an entirely different world for those proud Indians. Food and money and clothing—jobs and self-respect—all these things are coming their way, thanks to you Americans who realized what an injustice was being done. We can say once more—they were good enough to die for their country and they're certainly good enough to live for it!

AS WE said before, keep the letters coming in. We intend to make *The Reader Rides the Range* a regular feature of the magazine and we want all the letters you care to write. We'll publish as many as we can, whether they're for or "agin" us. Controversy is meat and drink to your editor. By the way, we don't need to tell you to pay particular attention to the American Indian series that we've been running lately. So long for now . . . RAP.

SALOON
PALACE

MISS CANARY

BORN Martha Jane Canary, the character of whom I tell is better known as Calamity Jane. Jane was indeed a character, and she acquired great notoriety because of her eccentricities. Yet only in the frontier environment in which she lived, in the wild, lawless days of the West of the nineteenth century, could a woman like Jane find such scope for her activities, such undisciplined outlet for boundless vitality. In quieter, more civilized times, Jane would probably have been a sadly frustrated and discontented individual, had she tried to live in the pattern of a conventional community as the proper Miss Canary; instead she led an uninhibited, abandoned, adventurous life as the famous Calamity Jane.

As an impressionable young girl in the 1860's, she came with her father to Virginia City, Montana, which at that time was the center of one of the wildest gold rushes this country has ever known. Jane looked about her, admiring the freedom, the excitement, the air of unrestrained adventure. She decided that she herself could become as rootin', tootin' a Wild Westerner as any man. Before long she began to boast that she could outride, outshoot, outcuss, outsmoke, and outdrink the best of them. She dressed like a man, smoked strong cigars, drank the toughest miner under the table, and professed to fear nothing on this good green Earth.

Throughout the West she moved in the years of her youth. She travelled with Custer's army for a while, in the official capacity of scout. Fortunately for her, she pulled stakes and left before the disaster in which Custer encountered Sitting Bull on the Little Big Horn River. Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, the Dakotas, all knew her well.

She is known to have been married, legitimately, at least three times. But true love came to Miss Canary only once, in the person of Wild Bill Hickok. When she met him, while in her early twenties, he was surrounded with glory. He had forty notches on his gun, and was famous for his feats of daring, and his bravery when the odds were against him. To Jane he was her man, and history does not say that Wild Bill resisted her. The affair ended in tragedy, however, when Hickok was shot in the back while playing poker. Jane wept at the funeral, and from then on her downward course went faster.

Here is one of the many stories told about Calamity Jane which illustrates how her reputation grew, and shows the awed respect with which she was regarded when aroused to anger, which was often. It was in Deer Lodge, Montana, and Jane entered the Brewery Saloon there one day, carrying a bucket which she wanted filled with "suds." One of the boys at the bar, who had been imbibing a little too freely, suddenly decided to play a practical joke. Foolishly, he threw a lemon, and the thing hit Calamity on the ear.

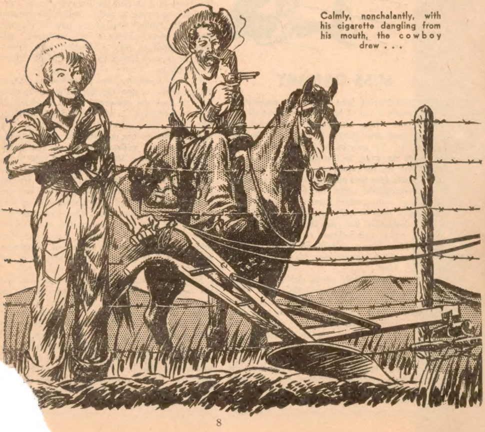
The lady's response was instantaneous. Slinging her bucket of beer through the mirror hanging over the bar, she demanded of the suddenly silenced assemblage, in her most lurid wordage, who had had the effrontery to hit a lady with a lemon. When no one answered, she backed to the pool table and without any more ado began hurling pool balls. There was a mad rush to the door, for a pool ball in the hands of Calamity Jane was a deadly weapon. In a few seconds which it took for the room to clear, there was one casualty, a certain Bud Brown, who woke up several hours later wondering what had happened to him, and then spent the next few weeks recovering. "Soft-headed," scorned Calamity, when told of her victim, though another of the missiles had torn a hole almost through the wall of the saloon.

Jane's swashbuckling youth was soon over, and her stock began to fall. Habitually drunk, she haunted saloons begging for liquor, and more liquor. The woman who had for a time been the most famous in the West, found herself treated with increasing contempt. She did any menial work she could find for a few pennies, which she spent for whiskey. Her end came in the poorhouse, on August 2, 1903, when she was fifty-
years old. Pitying townspeople, rememberin
hey-day of grandeur, furnished the money
she could be buried beside Wild Bill Hic
real lover. —*By France*

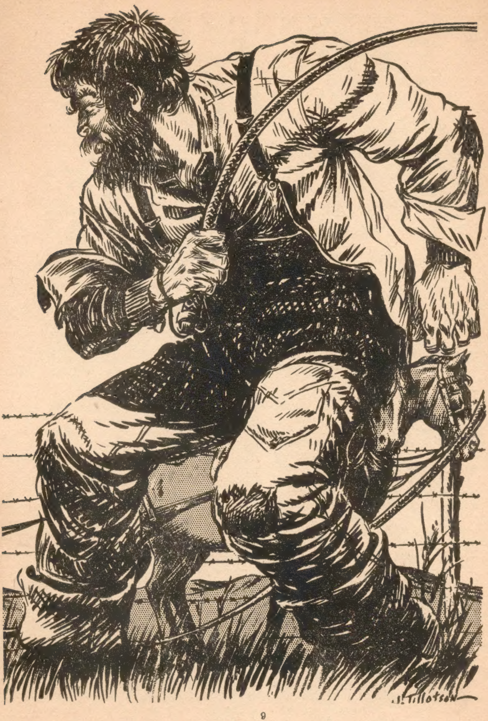
DESPERADO

by William Hopson

Jude grew up over night—changed from the easy-going farm boy to the killer, fast—while Blackie's smile changed to anger and then fear



Calmly, nonchalantly, with his cigarette dangling from his mouth, the cowboy drew . . .


J. Tillotson

THE field covered twelve acres of what once had been flat prairie land, and it was at that time of the year when the crops had been laid by. But Jude's father was a firm believer that no son ever should be idle for a moment, particularly on a dry land farm; a big, brutal, hulking man who was a hell roaring drunken devil one moment and a God fearing, Bible quoting fanatic the next. That was why Jude still worked in the field that afternoon when the Texas trail herd lumbered by. The encroaching weeds beyond the strong fence always seemed diabolically eager to crawl under the lower strand of barbed wire and emplant their roots among the corn that now waved in a sea of green, the stalks rustling softly in the slight breeze that had sprung up.

His father was a good farmer; enough that, instead of planting close to the fences to squeeze into the crop every possible stalk, he planted wide, leaving a twelve foot belt between the fences and the green. And Jude had been plowing this belt, pushing back the weeds by turning them under, making long bright furrows in the cool earth; for it had been a good year. Plenty of rain and just the right amount of sun.

Jude said, "Whoa, boys," and eased the span of big bays to a halt. They were sleek, well fed, and as strong as oxen. That was one thing about his father: His was the best farm with the best equipment in the country. But then, Jude thought, he'd got the jump on so many of the hundreds of others who were wrestling life and some kind of hoped for future security from the soil. Jude's mother had furnished the money. That and a fanatical devotion to hard work from daylight until dawn had done the rest.

Jude wrapped the lines around the handle and walked over to the fence, placing a dirt encrusted shoe on the lower strand. He leaned there, his eyes on the herd. This was the third one that had passed within two weeks and each time some kind of a strange tingling went up along his young spine at the sight. There was something about those wild, longhorn cattle, about the ragged riders, as wild looking as the steers, that stirred the imagination. They were free men who owed the world nothing except, perhaps, a fierce allegiance to the outfit they worked for; a loyalty that too often was backed up by the roar of six shooters and Winchesters.

Jude leaned over the top strand and drank in the sight.

A half mile to the east of him the leaders were beginning to come abreast of where he stood. He saw two men riding at the head—point—and the thought unconsciously pushed itself into his mind that they were leaders, like the lead steers that plodded behind a few yards away. The dust began there, gathered in intensity and roiled back alongside the long lumbering line of cattle; so thick that the men along the flanks wore their bandanas up over their noses. He had seen them close up once, and they somehow looked like desperados or stage robbers.

A rider back along the herd suddenly spurred out of the dust and came toward him at a lope. Jude stood there watching him, the tingle hitting his spine. It was the first time one of them ever had come this way. He knew that they hated farmers —whom they contemptuously referred to, in all classes, as "damned sod-busting nesters" — and the farmers hated them equally as well. One hundred and fifty miles to the north lay Abilene, in the first flush of its cattle and railroad boom; a hell-roaring town where the last of the starving buffalo hunters now reduced to the ignominious job of hauling the whitened bones of the animals they once had slaughtered by the thousands, mingled with tough, drunken trail drivers up from the south from long drives and tearing the town apart in wild sprees before heading back to the loneliness and hard work of the range.

The cowmen hated the flat land farmers for plowing under the range, and the farmers hated them because, when they came through, sometimes pure hatred sent a herd trampling down fences and fields and sucking up even the few head of stock the farmers owned. They had protested, cursed, and threatened helplessly—all in the face of contemptuous grins as the herd taking their stock with it, moved on. They were helpless to do anything about it, and that helplessness alone fired their hatred to pitch heat and caused them to steal and butcher every stray they could lay hands on.

The rider came on, pulling his sweaty claybank to a halt beside the fence, and

Jude thought he had never seen such a magnificently wild figure of a man. He was tall in the saddle, about twenty-eight, and had the blackest hair a man ever saw . . . . though just now it was so shaggy it almost covered his ears. His faded flannel shirt was out at the elbows of the sleeves and over the left breast was a large tear, exposing a six inch area of browned skin covered with a matt of black hair. His leather chaps were held together only by a patch work of rawhide thongs, and one spur on a worn boot had lost a rowel. It had been replaced by a fifty-cent piece of silver. The man wore two guns.

"Hello, nester," he said.

"Howdy," Jude said.

"Seen any herds passing by lately?"

"Three."

"When?"

JUDE took out a nearly full tobacco sack and rolled himself a smoke. He caught the almost hungry, quickening look in the man's black eyes, a brief, hidden flicker the rider of the claybank hadn't intended him to see. Jude held out the sack, dangling on the end of a string. "Smoke?"

"Thanks." The rider lifted reins and touched a rowel to the off side of the horse. It sidled over and the man bent from the saddle, straightening again. He rolled, took the proffered match, sighed and held out the sack.

"You can keep it," Jude said. "I got plenty more."

The rider reached into a pocket and brought out a silver dollar. He flipped it through the air. His eyes became a little hard as Jude remained motionless over the top strand, the big round coin plupping into the damp, newly turned softness of the field. "I said you could keep it," Jude said.

"Won't take cowman money, eh?" asked the other. A faint touch of amusement had come into his eyes.

"I said I got plenty more."

"I see," replied the other, and for the first time he smiled. It was an easy-going, friendly grin. "Thanks, nester. About those cattle. When?"

Jude shifted his weight to the other foot and put another elbow over the top strand. "First about three weeks ago. Two mile east of here. Busted down all the fences and stole all the stock. Second about a week ago. The third day before yesterday. Same track you're following."

"See the brands on that last herd?" His voice had become sharp.

"Two of their steers strayed over this way. NP on the left hip. No road brand."

"Hmmm." A pause while the rider smoked thoughtfully. He turned in the saddle. One of the men riding at point had broken away too and was loping toward them. The two gunman turned his attention to Jude again. "What happened to the two strays?" he asked, and again Jude caught the faint touch of a saturnine smile in his handsome, rugged face.

"One hind quarter is over in our meat house," Jude said calmly. "The others are scattered around among some other farmers."

The rider leaned back and laughed. It was a rich laugh, and Jude somehow liked him, even if he was one of the men who were sworn enemies of the farmers. "You damned nesters," he chuckled. "Good Texas beef must taste good after salt pork."

Jude felt himself begin to freeze up a little. "We eat a lot of chickens and kill a pig now and then and got a garden," he said coldly.

The rider looked down, amused tolerance in his eyes. "Okay, nester. I'm hunkered. How far is it to Abilene and which way?"

Jude lifted a left elbow and pointed, a course of about twenty degrees east from the one followed by the herd. "Hundred and fifty miles. You'll come in about ten-fifteen miles to the west the way you're traveling."

"Thanks."

The rider turned in the saddle as the second man came galloping up. One look at him told Jude that this man was the boss. He was tall, about six feet two, ragged as the others were ragged, with a long drooping mustache and a pair of piercing blue eyes. Authority showed in every movement of his body, in the flick of his eyes; authority and almost arrogance.

"Well, Blackie?" he snapped out. "What'd the kid say?"

"Day before yesterday."

This would refer to the NP herd. "Late, almost dark," Jude added. "They camped four miles ahead at Gramma Creek. They allus do," he added.

"So they got in ahead of us?" the tall man said.

The other nodded. "I reckon. And if one of them gets drunk in town and talks loose, such as admitting they stampeded us, I'm going to have a little score to settle with Harrison. And collect for a new shirt."

Jude looked at the tear and somehow he could picture that big black haired rider running amid stampeding cattle, and maybe his horse going down in the middle of the night amid rain and lightning. There had been much rain of late. That was why the corn waved so beautifully in the field.

"How far to Abilene and where?" rapped out the foreman or trail boss.

"Kid says hundred and fifty miles and swing 'em a bit to the east?"

The piercing blue eyes stared down at the overalled figure still leaning over the top strand. "How the hell do you know?"

"I reckon I've been there," Jude said calmly.

The twogun rider broke into a soft laugh, and then finished, grinning. "Hunkered you, Shelby! He sure hunkered you that time."

The trail boss saw no humor in the situation. He stared coldly at Jude again, then abruptly wheeled his horse and gigged in the spurs. Something in his manner indicated that he expected the other rider to follow, but the black-haired man called Blackie didn't. Something in ***his*** manner said that here was a man who kow-towed to no man and wasn't afraid of the very devil himself.

"That's Nute Shelby. Trail boss," he said. He had lifted a leg and had been sitting with it curled around the saddle horn. Now he lowered it, found the stirrup with a worn boot toe, preparatory to taking leave. He looked down again, past Jude's shoulder, to where the silver dollar stood on its edge, half buried in the dirt.

"Pick up the dollar, kid," he said.

"You pick it up," Jude said. "I told you I got plenty at the house."

The rider laughed, and at that moment there came a new sound in the rustle of the corn back of Jude. His father had sneaked upon him again.

CHAPTER II

THE elder Gordon was in his mid-fifties and a powerfully built man. He had the solid bone of the soil worker with big knarled hands, and in one of those hands he carried a twenty foot length of coiled blacksnake whip of shiny plaited leather with an eighteen inch hickory stock. He was dark, not quite so dark as the rider of the claybank, but his skin was surprisingly light, covered now with a short stubble of pepper shot whiskers. Jude's mother had been auburn haired and even freckled, and it was from her that he had inherited his own reddish hair and the mass of freckles. In moments of drunken frenzy John Gordon had, many times roared at her that the damned brat couldn't have been his because it didn't look like her. She'd probably gone out and had a very good time with some no-account city slicker in the town in Missouri where Jude had been born.

It was easy to see that the older man had been drinking heavily. Jude knew he had been running off a batch of stuff in the barn still this afternoon, which also accounted for the prosperity of the Gordon farm. John Gordon's neighbors for miles around beat a path to his door to buy the corn whiskey that came from the still. Gordon was jokingly known as the "corn farmer," and not without good reason. It accounted for that twelve acres now lazing greenly in the afternnon sun. Not much of that grain ever would find its way into the bowels of horses and hogs on the Gordon farm. It was ***still*** corn.

"You, Jude!" he roared. "What the bloody hell you mean standing there talking to that no-account saddle bum? Git at that plow and git it goin'. I'll have no lazy son of mine idlin' away his time talking to every thievin' cowman that comes along." And to the rider, his arm outstretched, coiled whip in hand. "Git! You git!"

The twogun rider obviously was amused. He looked at the whiskey flushed face and grinned. "Who's he, kid? Your old man?"

"My pa," Jude nodded, turning aside and moving to the plow handles.

"Looks to me like 'Pa' has done loaded himself up on panther juice and gone on the rampage. Son, you better do what he says. He looks terribly mad. Plumb riled up."

"Git!" Jude's father repeated fiercely. "If you think I'm afraid of them two pistols you're packin', I ain't."

"Most gents loaded to the tonsils with

raw moonshine liquor generally ain't," observed the smiling rider. And to Jude: "Thanks for the tobacco, son. For the past week I've been smoking everything from ragweed to the bark off mesquite trees. Better get on the plow handles or he might take the hide off you."

"You bet I'll take the hide off him." the elder Gordon said. "Minute he gits to the house I'm goin' to teach him to waste time out here when there's work to be done. I'll do it right now!"

HE SNAPPED the length of the whip out full and his arm went back. Jude unconsciously hunched his shoulders for the hide cutting slash that was to come. But it didn't come. He turned for a look at his father. The half upraised arm was slowly lowering the stock of the deadly blacksnake to the elder Gordon's side; and for a very good reason.

He was looking squarely down the muzzle of a heavy .45 caliber pistol, held low at the rider's right hip, half across the saddle.

"Just go ahead and do it, mister," came in a soft voice not at all in keeping with the rider's wild appearance. "I wouldn't make an orphan outa the kid, even though I'd be doing him a favor; but I'll fix up that arm and shoulder to where you'll have to learn how to work left handed. Give me the whip, mister."

"It's my whip . . . Blackie," Jude said, using the word hesitatingly and feeling a strange flush come to his face at such familiarity.

The rider sheathed the big pistol at his hip. "All right, son. It's your funeral. But if he uses that killer whip on you when it ain't even right to use on a hoss I'll just naturally come back here and give him a taste of it myself."

"It's all right. I can handle him . . . I guess," Jude said. "And much obliged. I'm obliged to you."

Blackie said, "That's all right, son," and watched as the broad back of the elder Gordon disappeared, striding angrily, into the green forest of the tall corn. "How old are you, kid?"

"Eighteen," Jude said.

"The hell! I figured you for about fifteen. Eighteen, eh? Well, when I was eighteen—and that was ten years ago—I taught my old man some manners with a single tree alongside the head and I haven't been back since. Guess I got to be going. Adios, and good luck."

"So-long," Jude said.

He stood there between the plow handles, unwrapping the lines, his eyes on the broad back of the galloping horseman. So his name was Blackie and he wore two pistols? Jude wondered why. He turned to the team, taking hold of the lines and slipping them over a shoulder.

"You . . . Maud! Pete! Giddup! Gittyup!"

He finished the furrow that afternoon, plowing south for two hundred yards to the corner, turning west along the ends of the rows, then north for a ways, and finally came into the east turn. He stopped the team midway in the field and not more than a hundred yards from the house. He unhooked them from the plow, hanging the trace chain rings over the hames. He always loved to unhook the inside ones, slipping in between the two sweaty, patient rumps and watching as they stepped aside to give him room between them. The sweaty smell of their bay bodies was always good to his senses, for he loved horses. That was about the only thing his father ever saw good in him: he had a way with horses.

"You, Maud, you old devil," he murmured and ran a hand over her big, velvety soft nose.

He coiled the lines on the hames, separating them, and went toward the wire gate. They obediently followed. He opened and let them go through, and while he closed the gate they shambled toward the harness shed. From another sod building a short distance away smoke, blue against the sky, curled and floated lazily upward. His father was running off the last of the batch. Jude unharnessed and went to the house. It was still pretty early; early, that is, for him to quit the field. Normally he would have made another round. But the herd and the meeting with the riders, plus his father's appearance, had set strange emotions stirring within him. They had been there before, the last weeks past now. He had felt them innerly, tugging at him, and the tugging had developed into a restlessness he could understand and yet couldn't understand. His life belonged here on this farm, on these plowed up prairies, among people of his own kind. His father was a farmer and expected him to become a farmer. The world was a far distant place peopled by strangers in dim and distant states of which he and his father and the neighbors around them were only vaguely aware.

Jude washed up at the bench inside the door and automatically began getting supper. His father would be in pretty soon, and his father always ate like a hog at a trough after imbibing an overload of whiskey. Somehow Jude didn't feel hungry . . . but there was still supper to cook. He lit the fire in the battered kitchen stove his mother had brought all the way from Missouri those many years ago and then looked into the oven. Some corn bread left over from dinner, a pot of beans sprinkled with chili he'd bought on the last long trip to Abilene. A couple of big steaks off the trail herd steer's haunch out in the smoke house, topped off by molasses, ought to suffice.

FOOTSTEPS sounded beyond the open kitchen door of the three room shack and his father paused, resting a hand on the doorway to steady himself.

"I'm goin' to beat the holy hell out of you," he said thickly. "Talkin' to them cow punchers and lettin' the weeds grow, eh? Stood right there while his own father had a pistol pulled on him. His own father! Your mother was no damned good but I'll make a good man out of you if I have to beat you to death."

Jude had backed away into a corner. The old fear was upon him again, but for the first time he looked down in his hand and discovered that it contained a heavy skillet. This thing had happened so many times in the past since the year his mother had been dead. That past year had been one of plain hell. Up until then John Gordon had taken out much of his drunken rages upon her, because of one of those freaks of nature that happen quite often in the life work of a doctor.

Jude had been born a "blue baby." He had been almost black at birth, a fact that had sent his father storming and roaring into a big drunk and then coming home an hour later, with a borrowed shotgun, to kill his wife and the hours old son.

"A damn blue!" he had yelled. "My own wife delivering up to me a damn blue baby!" He had almost screamed the words, and only the fact that a rugged small town doctor had first knocked him down and then shaken him to sensibility, while explaining a common occurence, had saved the lives of Jude and his mother. Later, when Jude had changed color and took on his mother's nature, it was a "city slicker" who had been the adulterer.

Jude had always felt deep down inside him that his father knew these were untruths. His father knew that the woman he had married had been loyal, patient, and completely chaste. But a man had to have some reason for letting off steam in his drunken rages, and these things John Gordon had found good excuses.

It might have been the strange stirrings within Jude these past weeks. It might have been one of a thousand references to his mother's character. All he knew now was that he had the skillet in his right hand, a heavy, cast iron thing encrusted a coal black from many years on the stove, and he lifted it slowly.

"You ain't going to whip me now or no more, Pap," he said. "I've taken my last licking off you, understand?"

"I understand, all right, you young whelp! Defy me, will you? Defy me as the Israelites defied their God after they came out of Egypt. I'll put on you the same punishment that He put on them. I'll put the fear of the Lord God Almighty into you as He did His wayward children. Where's that blacksnake? I'm going to take the hide off you."

He staggered toward the bedroom door and Jude, trembling with fear and anger, watched him go. He stood with the skillet in his hand. *I'm going to kill my father,* something inside his brain said. *I'm going to kill my father.*

The elder Gordon was fumbling around in the other room, stumbling and cursing. Presently there came a half muffled crash of the bed. Jude, the skillet in his hands, tip-toed to the door and looked in. His father was laying half across the bed and he was already snoring.

Something like a sigh went out of Jude Gordon's young lungs. Slowly he lowered the half ready skillet. His glance went from his father on the bed to the old Sharps Buffalo gun standing in a corner near his own bed. It was a 45—110—550. That meant a .45 caliber, 110 grains of black powder, and a 550 grain slug of lead. He had killed his first and only buffalo with that gun at the age of eleven, having to rest the huge, crow-bar-like barrel over a bank because he wasn't big enough nor strong enough to hold it up. The kick of it almost had torn off his shoulder. Later he had got to where he could fire it pretty good, leaning forward a bit and holding the stock tight against his shoulder. That way it didn't hurt him so much, particularly when he stuffed one of his mother's towels down under his shirt as padding.

JUDE went to his bed and put a knee on it, reaching up on a shelf he had built on the wall to keep his prized possessions. They weren't many. Eight or nine sacks of tobacco with papers, a few greenish colored .50 caliber Sharps shells he'd picked up on the prairie—memento of the Buffalo hunters—several rattles of snakes he'd killed, including one with thirteen rattles or "rings" as he called them, a pocket knife with two broken blades, and a small rusty saw that one of the neighbors said was used to dehorn cattle. His books, or rather the books his mother had left him, were in a case along the wall, with a picture of her on top.

He took down the tobacco and the rattle with the thirteen "rings." You were supposed to handle the rattles very carefully because somebody had told him that they had a certain kind of dust on them and it would get on your hands and then into your eyes when you rubbed them and make you blind. Jude always had washed his hands after handling the rattlesnake rattles. He had been very careful about this. It was almost a ritual. A man had only one pair of eyes and he didn't want to lose his sight just because he had been careless in handling a pair of rattlesnake rattles.

He went to the book case. There were so many he wanted to take, but it was one hundred and fifty miles to Abilene and a man had to travel light when he was on foot. He chose two and placed them on the bed beside the tobacco sacks and the snake rattles. He picked up his mother's picture and put it with them. Then he took the skillet and went back into the kitchen, dropping it onto the top of the stove whose fire was still burning, now down to a bed of coals. He'd let the beans and cornbread stay in the oven. They would be hot when his father slept it off, and woke up hungry.

He made his way to the barn to get a gunnysack. Maud and Pete had finished their supper and were ambling around the lot, seeking a good place to stop and doze from the day's plowing. Jude found the sack, went over and rubbed each of them on the nose, and stood there looking about him. The sun was getting pretty low on the western horizon, losing its heat strength as it pushed downward, and the corn tassels were silent in the evening as though, like Maud and Pete, seeking rest. Jude nuzzled Maud's patient muzzle again.

"So-long, old girl," he murmured. "I hope Pa don't get drunk and beat you. If he does, kick hell out of him."

It didn't take long to pack his belongings. His mother's picture he carefully wrapped in a prized new shirt. He went into the bedroom again, after returning to the kitchen with the weighted sack. He had forgotten something. His eyes roved around the room until they caught sight of the hickory stock of the blacksnake whip beneath the edge of the bed. He brought it out, carefully coiled it, and put it in the sack. There was a pencil and paper on his mother's writing desk and he sat down.

He wrote swiftly in a clear unawkward hand:

Pa,
I'm going away to Abilene,
Jude.

That was all. He placed the sheet of foolscap on the bed where his father would be sure to see it when he came out of his stupor. The elder Gordon lay on his back now. He had twisted around somehow and got straightened out on the bed. He lay with his mouth open, the lips dried and cracked, and even in drunken sleep he kept smacking them. Jude knew that the liquor had sucked up all the liquid out of his system and that it was demanding water; more water. Glasses and glasses of water. So he'd better get out. His father would be waking most any time now and be staggering to the water pail. Jude made one more trip out back, returned and presently set off across the prairie, the weighted sack over one shoulder. Once, a half mile distant, he looked back. He turned for a moment and, in the yellow, cool glow of the late evening sun, stared at the shack. It had been his home for most of his life; at least that part of his life when memory had been clear and coherent.

Maybe, he thought, *I'll come back some day.*

He turned and resolutely set off on foot again.

The sun was almost down now and beyond the rim of the western and southern horizons the sky was beginning to turn blue; a cold and ominous blue. He knew what that meant; he had lived on the prairies too long. Unless he missed his guess there was going to be one hell of a rain storm sometime between darkness and dawn. He increased his pace from about two and a half miles an hour to three, making a mental note that perhaps he should have brought along a quilt or blanket. He hadn't figured that he'd need them, because the nights were warm and the added weight would be a burden. Well, let it rain, if it would. He had never heard of any man dying from a summer rainstorm and he would weather it through. But he increased his pace.

HE HAD wanted to bring along the old Sharps, for though the gun actually belonged to his father, it had been understood that the weapon was Jude's, since the elder Gordon hadn't fired it in years. No matter. Coyotes were too cowardly to attack a man at night, and he could chase away inquisitive skunks with a stick. He had matches and some food taken from the meat house and he would get along. Let it rain.

Darkness set in.

He strode on, taking the long, steady steps of a farmer. He didn't feel tired. After all why should a man get tired working around the place during the morning, plowing furrows in the afternoon, and then quitting at least an hour early? It had been an easy day. He didn't realize then just how much strength and endurance was in his young body, hardened by years on the farm of his father. He would make the willows along Gramma Creek, cut a few with a knife, and build himself a shelter. He had matches and he had food to be cooked—he was getting hungry now—and he would make out all right.

He glanced at the darkened sky again; not worriedly but just taking precautions. Nothing to worry about so far. Maybe it wouldn't rain after all. Half the neighbors who came to the farm to buy moonshine corn whiskey prided themselves on being weather experts. There was one old man—Dad Summers—who claimed that the bullet from a (damned) Union sharpshooter still lodged in his leg could tell him when it would rain, snow, sleet, hail, and predict what kind of crops they would all have next year. Jude wasn't sure that the old man was always right. He was, on second thought, pretty certain that garrulous Dad was just a talkative old man who wanted to impress people and didn't know a darned thing about the weather. Bullet in his leg. Huh! You could tell by the clouds or the color of the sky. One of the roving Indian bands—a squaw—had said a coyote told her what the weather would be for the next week. He had asked another, a wrinkled old harridan who came begging for food. She had said she could look at the willows at sundown and tell.

Pah!

He strode on . . . but he still knew the color of that sky and he still didn't like it. Some instinct told him that it was going to rain like hell. All right, let it pour. Jude strode on in the gathering darkness, lengthening his stride still more. He wasn't afraid of the rain. He was hungry and wanted to make the creek as soon as possible in order to fix something to eat. He glanced at the now night sky again and noted that it had a dark rim around the horizon but no clouds. Just that dark rim.

He covered three miles and then topped a ridge. Here he paused for a moment to ease the gunnysack to the other shoulder . . . and to look back once more. But the ridges of the undulating prairie, and the night, had swallowed up all that he had left behind. He drew in a deep breath of the night air, turned his young face resolutely to the north, and set out again. After a time he dropped down a long, scarcely definable slope, and saw in the darkness the waters of the creek ahead. From in the distance, to his right, came the low, uneasy bawl of cattle and he instinctively pushed his course a bit to the left. Most of his life had been spent in the semi-solitude of the farm, and he unconsciously avoided people. On the streets of Abilene he had been self conscious, filled with the feeling that all the eyes on the street were upon him; probing him, boring through him, jeering at him for being a mere farm boy from the outlands; and quite unaware that they had given him scarely a passing glance, not to speak of a passing thought.

He swerved away further to the west.

He was three hundred yards from the creek when there came the sound of hoofs in the darkness and a man's voice called out sharply, "Speak up, Mister. Who is it?"

Jude wanted to call out an answer, to give his name. But his tongue froze in his throat and he couldn't speak. He stood, rigid in the darkness.

"Throw up your hands," came the command. "Get 'em up or I'll blow you to Kingdom Come."

JUDE raised his hands as high as he could, the weight of the loaded gunnysack sending little streams of pain along his left arm. The rider came nearer. Jude saw then the pistol in the right hand of the man in the saddle. He rode closer, peered down, and then suddenly he was laughing softly in the night.

"Hello, nester," Blackie said, sheathing that ominous big pistol at his right thigh. "Well, I'll be damned," came chuckling softly through the night. "Kid, you had me nervous for a moment. Didn't know who you were. Where the devil are you going this time of night, out on the prairie?"

Jude lowered his hands and placed the gunnysack on the ground. "Abilene," he said.

He was shaking a little bit, the shock of frozen fear not yet passed. The rider rode closer. He was on a black horse now.

"Abilene? What in the devil are you going to do there?"

"I don't know," Jude confessed, honestly. "But I'm going to Abilene," he added stubbornly.

The rider in the night gave off with that soft laugh of his. It was the friendly laugh Jude recognized. He swung down, holding the reins in his left hand.

"So you had it out with the old gent full of booze and carrying the bull whip? Good boy. But . . . hell, kid, you can't walk one hundred and fifty miles across these prairies all by yourself. What's got into you anyhow? Don't you know the coyotes will get you?"

"I ain't afraid of the coyotes," Jude said. "I've lived here too long. And I'll get to Abilene."

The twogun rider chuckled softly in the night, the sound sending a warm something into Jude's soul. "I know you will. I knew you were a spunky little cuss the minute I laid eyes on you. But . . . hell, kid, it's one hundred and fifty miles."

"I know," Jude said. "I've been there."

"What's it like?"

Blackie was rolling a cigarette—a quirly from the same sack Jude had given him that afternoon. Jude said, "It's a big town. Lots of people there.

"Very good description. A very good, or big town. Lots of people there. That's what they said about Kansas City, Chicago, New York . . . the first time I went there. Lots of people. This is damned good tobacco—what did you say your name was?"

"Jude?"

"Jude. Good name. And this is still good tobacco. I'm selfish, Jude. I hid it from the boys. Wouldn't dare roll a smoke when I rode in to camp for a change to a night horse. I got first trick tonight. Where you going now?"

"Down here by the creek to make a fire and cook some supper?"

The cigarette tip was glowing brightly in the darkness. It lit up Blackie's handsome face and even the long shaggy locks of his uncut hair. He pulled hard and the bright red tip described a glowing arc through the darkness as his hand dropped down to his side, near one of the guns at his hips. His exhalation of satisfaction came clearly to Jude's keen ears.

Blackie put the cigarette to his lips again. "You'll do no such thing," he said. "You're coming to camp with me. I'll be relieved pretty soon and we'll go in and get supper. Come on, Jude. Get up back of me. Don't know whether this ornery broomtail will carry double or not but it's a good time for him to learn."

"I can walk it," Jude said stubbornly. "You don't have to worry about the dollar."

"What dollar?"

"For the tobacco. I got it in my pocket. I picked it up out of the dirt. I want to give it back to you."

Blackie had mounted. The glowing cigarette arced to the ground, a flick of thumb and finger, and Blackie's voice said, "You're okay, Jude. You got the stuff. Keep the cartwheel. Try your luck with it on the roulette wheel in Abilene. What's that you've got with you?"

"Just a few things."

"Hand 'em up. I'll tie them to the saddle horn. Then get up back of me. Ever ride a horse that might try to buck?"

"I rode a few young work horses . . . bareback," Jude said. "Just breaking them in. A man gets tired in the field when he has to plow all day and then follow a team in. Better to break them to ride and let them carry you in."

"Lot different from a knot head cow pony. Holy smokes"—as the gunnysack was handed up. "It's heavy."

"Just a few things. I wouldn't want to be obliged to you."

"No obligations at all, Jude. I'm not forgetting the smokings. Here," extending a hand down through the darkness. "Now the fun starts."

He had disengaged a left boot from the stirrup. He held the head of the suspicious cow pony up high as Jude extended a long leg and got an uncertain hold in the stirrup. A strong hand came down, caught Jude's right one, and hoisted him up back of the cantle.

"Hang onto my waist and don't grip your feet in his flanks," Blackie warned. "Here we go."

THEY went. The cow pony, all of its indignation outraged, fought to get its head down so that it could buck. This was something new. It was bad enough that these riders mounted it in the morning, jeeringly allowed it to buck and work off steam, and then rode the daylights out of it during the day. This was something that a hard working cow pony could understand. But to have *two* riders aboard it! There was a limit to such things; a good hard working cow horse had its pride.

Jude clamped both arms about Blackie's waist and hung on, keeping his feet well forward, out of the animal's sensitive flanks. That much he knew. No man wanted another man to tickle him in the ribs. The spot there was sensitive, and it was an insult to a man's dignity to have somebody shoving their fingers playfully under a man's armpits. Jude knew just how that indignant pony felt. He didn't need the darkness to tell him that its ears were flattened with, or in, indignation and that all of its senses had been outraged.

He clamped hard with his legs along its forward ribs, just back of Blackie's chapped legs, hung onto Blackie's lean, hard muscled waist, and hoped for the best. Presently the pitching stopped. Blackie's laugh came back.

"He's plumb mad, Jude, and I guess I don't blame him a whole lot. Cow ponies have a code, the same as men. When you go beyond the code they get plenty sore about it. But he'll just have to put up with it for a little while, and I promise this crowbait he won't ever have to do it again. But I got to get you to camp. How're you making out?"

Jude hadn't made out too well. Despite his efforts to clamp the cow pony's ribs and hanging on to Blackie's waist he had bounced up and down several times, and now there was a sharp, biting pain in his groin where the cantle had struck it. He hung on grimly, gritting his teeth. The pony finally had given it up as a bad job and settled down to a plodding walk.

"All right," Jude said between clenched teeth. "Did you lose my belongings?"

"They rattled around somewhat but they're safe. I'll circle the herd. About time I got relieved."

They rode on, at a walk now, and Blackie began to hum. Jude, sitting back of him, holding on to the concha straps of the saddle now, could see the dark outlines of the bedded down herd not more than a quarter of a mile from Gramma Creek. Blackie's humming soon broke into words:

Beat the drum slowly,
And play the fife lowly,
Play the dead march as you sing me a song . . .

He coughed and Jude, his eyes on the dark outlines of the bedded down cattle again, said, "Why don't you put them across the creek?"

"Huh? Well, why?"

"The NP herd bedded down on the other side when they camped."

"Tell Shelby that. Nute would be happy to know it. If the NP bedded down over there then Nute would be happy to know that *we* bedded down over here."

"It's going to rain tonight, Blackie," Jude said.

"All right. It's going to rain tonight. We had a lot of rains coming up from Texas."

"But these creeks fill up and come down. If it rains you'll have a rising in no time. You shoulda bedded down on the other side."

"A weather prophet," Blackie said softly. "I'll tell Nute all about it. Maybe he'll roust out the herd and push 'em across tonight because you say it's going to rain tonight and the creek is coming down."

"It'll come down fast. It always does when it rains," Jude said, and somehow felt like a fool. Old man Summers and his bullet laden leg!

He sure felt like a fool and, then, clamped his lips tightly to put down his humiliation.

He should have kept his mouth shut.

CHAPTER III

FROM somewhere off in the night came the sound of soft singing, a mournful song of life and lost love on the range. Blackie rode toward it and presently a rider loomed up, clear against the night bowl of the sky. He pulled up short.

"My goodness, Blackie!" he exclaimed. "How fat you've got."

"Friend of mine behind me," Blackie's voice said. "How's the herd?"

"Quiet as a mouse. No trouble . . . thanks to the All High one. No more worry about stampedes from the NP outfit. Where'd you pick up the passenger? In the stage coach business now?"

"Half a cent a mile. We give special service. Shut up! You talk too much anyhow. Baggage at no extra expense. He says it's going to rain."

"He *does?*" There was mockery in the tones. "Well, goodness gracious me . . . oh, my great aunt Emma's left foot. I should have bought a new slicker instead of this leaky one I've used for five years. So it's going to rain? Look at the stars That fool teacher of mine in school used to make us study the stars. He said that the ones we were looking at might have been out for a million years and what we were seeing was just the glow of it as it went out. Tell the cook that when he blows out his lantern. It's going to rain. And me without a bath these last six months. Brrrrrrrr," and the mocking rider shook himself. "I always hated baths."

Blackie's voice said, over his shoulder, "Don't mind him, Jude. His name is Mike Kessler. He reads a lot of books but none of them seem to show him how to win at bunkhouse poker. He's a poet at heart. That don't seem to help him either. You really think it's going to rain?"

"Yes," Jude Gordon said. "A real down pour, Blackie."

"The passenger-weather prophet," Mike's voice said out of the darkness. "I tell you there is no accounting for the occult. I *knew* I should have got myself a new slicker and a weatherproof tarp for my bedroll. That old one of mine leaks like a sieve. You oughta hear the cook squall when I try to crowd the old bull out from in under the chuckwagon. Well, run along, children. I must be away to my dee-uties."

Blackie gigged the black into motion and presently Mike was lost in the night. Jude could almost sense the grin in Blackie's face.

"Mike," his voice finally came back over his shoulder, "is the scholar of the outfit. He can quote Shakespeare, poetry by the mile, and he's the biggest practical joker in the whole outfit. Watch out for him, Jude."

"I'll watch out for him," Jude said.

They continued their circle of the herd along the south edge, working eastward, and finally turned north. It was, Jude thought, just like following a plow furrow along a field. Presently the light of a fire twinkled through the darkness, grew, became outlined back of what was a staked out horse corral, and then outlined reclining figures around a big fire. They rode up to the horse corral where Jude slid down. Blackie descended with a long single step, and Jude saw then how the *remuda* corral was constructed. Stakes driven deep into the ground and a long line of ropes around it to keep the night horses in.

"This is the remuda corral, Jude," Blackie said. "We keep the night horses in here. Some horses just naturally are more sure footed than others, and we use them for riding night herd. That's what you see in there."

"Where are the others?" Jude asked.

"The night wrangler has them out, grazing. He'll bring them in about daylight, put them in the corral, eat breakfast, then turn in under a tree for the day to get his sleep in. When he wakes up he'll straddle his hoss and burn the breeze to catch up with the outfit, following the trail made by the cattle."

He unloosed Jude's gunnysack from the

saddle horn and handed it down. "You got a lot of stuff there, Jude," he said. "Seems kind of heavy."

"Yes," Jude said. "I got a lot of stuff."

He stood and waited while Blackie unsaddled and turned the horse loose. Most times you put the animal into the remuda corral, trusting that no night rider, riding herd, would be fool enough to pick a horse he *thought* was out of another man's string. Every rider knew his own string. But if the horse could be trusted to stick close by and graze, and then join the remuda when it was being driven in by the night wrangler, it could be turned loose. Blackie turned loose the black night horse and it promptly blew, slobbered, and then made for the creek cutting a silvery stream through the night three hundred yards north of them. It was thirsty. Afterward it would graze near camp. When the bell on the lead mare's neck tinkled at daylight, announcing that the night wrangler was bringing in the remuda, the black would join them.

Blackie dumped his saddle over the top rope of the remuda corral. "When you spend your hard earned money for a saddle you don't handle it careless like," he explained. "A saddle is something like a horse—you get to know it personal. You get the feel of it. You buy a new saddle, now, and you don't know how it's going to set. You're not used to it. You got to *get* used to it. Same way with a new puncher in an outfit. All the old hands have the best horses. They know them and what they can do. You'll see punchers riding up to the boss, when an outfit first starts out. It's up to him to allot the strings. Old hands always get the best horses, though the boss tries to be fair. A man can't do a good job of punching cows unless he's mounted as well as the next gent. But you'll find as much difference in men as you do in horses. Take me, for instance. I don't sleep or sit on my saddle like the other boys do. I don't believe in it. So you're going to Abilene and don't know what you're going to do? All right, that's fair enough. No more questions. Don't *you* ask any either. It's not good cow camp manners and sometimes it's not healthy."

JUDE knew that the older man was showing his appreciation for the tobacco and was trying to save him embarrassment when they approached the fire. And Jude was embarrassed; almost frightened. He knew that he must run a gauntlet of curious eyes and his heart began pounding all the harder as they came to the fire. He saw about a dozen men lounging around—he wasn't just sure how many because his stomach was all tight inside. He wished that he had gone on. He'd stick around the fire for a few minutes and then, somehow, manage to get away.

In that moment as a dozen sharp glances focused themselves upon him he would have given all his prized possessions, except his mother's picture, to be back on the farm or away somewhere else.

They came up to the fire and Blackie said, "Fine bunch of loafers."

"What's that you got with you—a stray maverick?" queried one, a buck-toothed, rather heavily built youth of about twenty-one, raising up on an elbow.

"That'll do for you, Grady," Blackie replied easily. "Just go back to your marbles and mumbly-peg games and you'll be all right."

That one brought a ripple of grins around the fire. Jude didn't know anything about trail drives or trail crews; but he had heard the farmers talk about some men having been up the trail two or three times on the hard drives and many made their *first* trip. His impression of the buck-toothed Grady was that this was his first trip and that he considered himself a full grown veteran. Jude didn't like Grady at sight.

"Well," drawled the buck-toothed puncher, "I notice that he ain't wearin' no brand an' his ears ain't notched, but I reckon we can rope him in the mornin' and fix that up and then turn him loose with the herd. He'll soon git trail broke."

Jude had put down the sack, his face flaming at the laughter. He felt all sick inside and some kind of a panic seized him. He picked up the sack in a sudden swift motion, flung it over a shoulder, but his bolt for freedom was stopped short by a powerful but friendly hand on his shoulder.

"Easy, Jude," Blackie's calm voice said, "I told you that some punchers are different than others—including talking too much. Grady's just a loud mouth who don't mean any harm. Come on back here and let's you and me eat supper. And if Grady opens his mouth again I'll push his boot in it, spur and all."

Jude came back, his face redder than ever all the hunger for supper having fled. He was too upset and uneasy at the strange position he found himself in; a "maverick." Grady was pretty much right after all, he thought. He was a stray.

A small, wiry built man wearing an apron was at the chuckboard in back of the huge chuckwagon. He had set out two plates with knives and forks. He wore boots, a weatherbeaten brown hat with a brim smaller than those of the other men, and he had the scraggliest mustache Jude ever had seen. It seemed to fall all over the area of his mouth. His nose was not long but stuck out in a kind of knob, as Jude described it to himself, and the knob was just a little on the red side. Jude had an idea that when the herd arrived in Abilene the cook would spend most of the time there in a drunken stupor.

"Come and git it," he said gruffly to Blackie. "I ain't got all night."

Jude and Blackie picked up the plates, Jude deliberately taking his plate last. He was going to watch Blackie and do what he did. He felt a close affinity to this man who had prevented his father from using the blacksnake bull whip on him that afternoon, and he somehow knew that Blackie held a special place all his own among the crew. Maybe it was because he wore two pistols instead of one; but Jude noticed that Grady had subsided. He lay back against his saddle, looking at Jude and grinning in such a manner as to make him feel uncomfortable. It was deliberate hoo-rawing and Jude disliked him all the more.

Blackie took the plate and went to the fire. Jude trailed him. He watched as the older man took beans, a big thick steak, and canned corn from the pots, after first pouring his tin cup full of coffee from the big black pot. He poured for Jude too and then went over to a vacant place near Jude's belongings and sat down, cross legged. He put the plate on his lap and began to eat. Jude did likewise, and with the first bite his hunger returned, gnawing at him as hunger never before had gnawed. For more than a year, since his mother's death, he had eaten his own cooking, except for the last trip to Abilene that spring. Now the food had been prepared differently and by a man who apparently knew his business.

JUDE fought down his desire to eat faster and paced his bites with the big rider beside him. Conversation had picked up around the fire again. Nute Shelby sat with his back against the rear wheel of the wagon, on a goods box, special consideration to the man who was leading the outfit. He took little part in the general conversation unless directly spoken to; a sour visaged, taciturn, hard man with a tremendous responsibility on his hands who gave back answers in curt monosyllables.

Far in the distance the lowing of the bedded down herd made background sounds for the conversation.

"So the NP is ahead of us, eh, Nute?" a middle aged-man with a bad bullet scar on the left cheek asked. Kessler, the poet and joker of the outfit, had named him "Cicatrix" because of the scar, and it had been shortened to plain Cic.

"That's what the kid said," grunted the trail boss.

"What kid?"

"That one," with a sharp incline of the head toward Jude.

Again those critical eyes, a whole ring of them swung to Jude, and he almost choked on his food. He lowered his head above his plate and said nothing.

"You say they passed us day before yesterday, kid?" Cic asked pointedly.

"Yes," Jude said.

"Run over your crops?" Jude's clothes and mein proclaimed him a farmer. He couldn't have been anything else.

"No."

"He's sure a talkative cuss for a kid," Grady simply had to put in.

Blackie's head turned a trifle and his voice was a little cold as he looked at the buck-toothed puncher. "You shut up," he said in a matter-of-fact voice that had lost all tone. "Can't you see the kid's scared and uncomfortable? You open that mouth of yours at him once more tonight and I'm going to shut it."

"None of that," Nute Shelby said, just as tonelessly.

"There'll be that and plenty more if Grady don't lay off this kid. And he's not as young as he looks. He's eighteen. If it hadn't been for him we'd a missed Abilene by ten or fifteen miles. Now you shut up, Grady."

"Well," defended Grady in a somewhat mollified tone, or trying to make it sound so to regain lost prestige, "all I said was that he's a talkative cuss."

"He's got to make up for the too much talking that you do."

Grady affected a bored yawn, still trying to hold his "prestige." "I'd give a dollar for a good sack of tobacco right now," he announced.

Blackie put his empty plate aside and reached into a pocket of the torn shirt. The sack and papers went sailing through the air, landing near the buck-toothed puncher's booted feet. "Pay me," Blackie said.

Grady stared. "Where'd you git it?" he asked obviously taken back.

"Pay me," Blackie said.

"I—uh—"

Jeers rose in chorus. Grady, red-faced, reached into his pants pocket and brought out a silver dollar and, affecting nonchalance, tossed it through the light from the fire. It slapped into Blackie's palm and the two gunman turned to Jude, smiling. He handed it over. "Jude," he smiled, "I had an idea you'd make a pretty good cow puncher, given time; but now I change my mind. You're going to become a merchant. Any man who can sell a sack of five cent tobacco for two dollars ain't got any business poking cows up a loading chute. Here, Jude, take it."

"I already got a dollar you gave me and I don't need it. It's enough," Jude finished, feeling his face get red again.

Blackie forced the coin into his hand. The other men were listening . . . and still grinning over Grady's discomfiture. Blackie made it worse by saying, "This kid gave me a sack of tobacco this evening when I'd have given a dollar myself—without squirming like Grady's doing—and then wouldn't pick it up after I tossed it to him. Now he's got another. Jude, you're all right."

"Hell, Grady," spoke up another tobacco hungry puncher, "ain't you going to give a man a smoke?"

Jude found courage to speak up then. He felt his voice high and off-key as he said, "He don't have to. I got some more."

He hurriedly put aside his empty plate —he was still hungry—and reached behind him to fumble in the gunnysack. He brought out not eight or nine but thirteen sacks of tobacco with papers. He had had more than he thought. He shyly handed them to Blackie and expectant grins broke out.

"This kid's all right," Blackie said, tossing sacks here and there. "And don't let me hear anybody calling him a kid anymore. His name's Jude and that's what it's going to be. I hear one of you gents calling him a kid and I'll just naturally tangle with you. He's eighteen and that's man age in this country. Savvy?"

ONE of the punchers, opening his free sack looked at Grady; and all of a sudden he burst out laughing. The laughter was contagious. It grew in volume, swelled higher into roars of laughter, and even the brittle-faced Nute Shelby was grinning. Grady was a decidedly uncomfortable young man at the moment.

"Hee-Hee-Hee," giggled Cic. "He pays a dollar for a sack of the makin's and then this nester passes 'em around *free*. Oh, haw-haw-haw!"

Grady had to make a comeback somehow and he did it. He grinned in the face of the laughter, though back of the grin Jude saw cold anger and fury at what he innocently had done. He felt almost as bad about it as Grady.

"Well, anyhow," the buck-toothed young puncher said, "as long as I've been without smokes it was worth it. But when I get to Abilene I'm sure going to drink me up a lot of whiskey. Ain't had a drink in nearly a month now and muh tongue is as dry as a dried cow——. I'd give five dollars for a good drink of whiskey right now."

Jude innocently took the bait. He disliked Grady but he didn't wish to make an enemy of him. He merely felt that the tobacco might help to pay for the meal. He had no way of knowing that cow country custom and courtesy demanded that any man, tramp or millionaire, was always welcome to a couple of meals at any chuckwagon with no questions asked. You were hungry and there was plenty of food. Any trail boss or cook who refused a hungry man a meal automatically was classified as a cheap skunk. Punchers lost respect for an outfit that was stingy with its meals, and some of them—cow punchers being the most independent men in the world—wouldn't ride for some ranches. It was true that now and then a man ran across such an outfit, but they were few and far between. Any hungry stranger was welcomed at the chuckwagon so long as he didn't ask personal questions, butt into anybody's business, and observed cow country manners. That meant not making a hog of himself when it came to the "dessert" or "sweets" to top off a meal. It might consist of anything from molasses to canned peaches, but it was a delicacy and not too plentiful, and a man, puncher or stranger, was supposed to take his share and no more.

Jude innocently took the bait.

He reached back of him into the sack once more and brought out a one gallon demijohn. "You don't have to do that," he said. "I kinda figgered you fellers might like a little and if I run into you it might come in handy. So I brought along some of Pa's best. Here it is."

Blackie started to say, "So that's why that sack was so heavy—" But he didn't quite make it. For a roar that shook the night went around the fire. Cic got up, looked at Grady, then fell on his face on his saddle, his body shaking with nothing less than pure howls.

"Pay him—pay him!" he bawled. "He hunkered you. He hunkered you! Oh, my poor great grandmother's ghost! Oh, haw-haw-haw!"

Jude sat there, astonishment on his face. He was bewildered and wondered if he had done anything wrong. He had only thought they might want a drink. He wasn't sure just what he ought to do now. He looked at Blackie appealingly. But Blackie was occupied otherwise. His head was bent over his chapped lap and his big shoulders were shaking convulsively. He leaned back and stretched out full length on the ground and his roars of laughter filled the night.

He struggled to a sitting position, wiped the tears from his eyes, and looked at Grady. That young man, could his thoughts have been read, wished at the moment that he was miles away. He grinned sheepishly, almost foolishly, and again Jude caught that hidden threat back of his eyes. He knew he had made an enemy.

"Pay him," Blackie said. "You made your play and the kid backed it up with a royal flush. First he hunkered me, then he got Nute just as bad, now he's got you *twice* . . ." Blackie went off into laughter again.

Grady squirmed uncomfortably and looked at Nute. The trail boss said, curtly, "The kid called your play. Pay him."

"I—uh—ain't got—Cic will you lend me some money? Just till we get to Abilene and get paid off. I'm kinda short, like most of us are, and—"

"Not a danged cent," the scar faced man cut in, still giggling. "You got yoreself into this mess and you sure as the devil can get yoreself out of it.

JUDE mustered up his courage. "He don't have to pay anybody," he said. "It was Pa's likker and I guess I worked hard enough to earn it. I just brought it along in case—"

"He'll pay," Nute Shelby's curt, hard voice cut in. "You get five dollars out of Grady's wages when I pay off in Abilene."

"He don't owe me anything. Him or anybody else. Pa's got plenty of it and I brought it along. Anyhow, I won't get to Abilene for a few days yet."

The embarrassment was upon him again. He rose to his feet. The jug, in Blackie's hands, was tilted. He took one—a very small one, Jude noticed—and passed it on to the next man. It went the rounds of the fire, followed by a trip over to Nute, who curtly shook his head. "Go ahead and drink up, but when Pokey says roll out in the morning, you'd damn well better roll out. Any man who don't will get a rope wrapped around his bedroll and take a trip out across the prairie and one I'll guarantee he won't enjoy. Here, Pokey," to the cook.

Pokey wiped his lips and they gave off a smacking sound. He tilted the jug and long gurgles came from his throat. A man's voice said, "Save some for the night crew, you hawg," and everybody laughed.

Jude was up, and now he picked up his gunnysack with its precious belongings, including the coiled bull whip. "Well, I thank you for the supper," he said, "but I got to be going."

A man raising the demijohn to his lips for a second time, slowly lowered it. "Going where, kid?" he asked, in surprise.

"His name's Jude," Blackie's voice cut in sharply.

"Where you going, Jude?" asked the

man with the poised jug.

"I got to make camp over west of here," Jude explained awkwardly, unsure of himself. "It's going to rain tonight and I got to fix up a shelter in the willows. I'm obliged to you for the supper. I got some meat and stuff in the sack," he finished weakly.

They were staring at him. This country kid's ignorance was beyond belief. This flat land farmer boy didn't know what it was all about. Leave them. After the tobacco and the jug of whiskey!

"Son," a very old looking puncher said in a soft and a very gentle tone of voice, "you just put that sack right down. You're staying here with us. I've got an extra blanket in my soogan and maybe we can scrape up some more among the boys. Blackie says you're going to Abilene. So are we. You stay here."

"I'm much obliged but I wouldn't want to be—" he struggled with the courage to say the word—"beholden to nobody. I got enough meat and such stuff to last me till I get in. And him—" indicating Grady "—he don't owe me nothing."

Blackie's voice broke the silence that followed; a stunned silence. This was a new one on them. This flat lands farmer kid was all right. Blackie's words were directed at Nute Shelby.

"Nute, tomorrow morning you put this kid—you put Jude to work helping Pokey at the wagon. Give him an ax and let him chop down wood so's Peanut can haul it in on his rope." He turned to Jude. "The day wrangler has to help Pokey with the wood supply. You can cut it and Peanut can haul it in, and then you give Pokey a hand around the chuckboard. It's a lot better riding on the wagon than hitting it afoot. This Jude," he said to the others, "was walking a hundred and fifty miles to Abilene because his old man was going to cut him to pieces with a bull whip this afternoon."

Grady's voice, a touch of petulance in it, cut in from across the fire. "How'd you know, Blackie?"

"I threw a gun on him," came the cold reply; and then, for some strange reason, Blackie got up and walked alone into the night.

A STRANGE man. A very strange man, Jude thought. And by now he was almost worshipping the black-haired rider who wore the two guns. He somehow felt that Blackie was different. He was unlike these other men. He spoke in the vernacular of the cow country, and yet, now and then, Jude had caught words and their manner of expression that told him Blackie lived in a world all his own. Jude was puzzled.

"Thanks," he said. "I'm much obliged to you but I'll make out all right. And I expect I better get going down along the creek. I got to build a shelter before the rain sets in."

"Rain?" Grady was looking up at the sky and guffawing. "Look here, farmer, we learned all about rains and lightning and stampedes on this trip north. We got to where we know this prairie weather better than we know cows. It ain't goin' to rain."

The jug was still going around. They had been on the trail long weeks, and even months, these tough, hard bitten, lean riders, and drinks of whiskey had been few and far between. Nute Shelby was looking at Jude.

His penetrating eyes were sharp. "How come you know it's going to rain?" he demanded sharply. And his eyes too, like Grady's scoffing ones, went to the clear, starlit sky.

"I don't," Jude confessed. "I just know it's going to rain. You shoulda put your cattle across the creek before it comes down in a rise."

CHAPTER IV

THE laughter around the fire changed. It was a bit strained and sardonic now. This nester kid was a pretty good farmer kid, giving them tobacco and a jug of whiskey he happened to have brought along, but now he was getting too big for his britches. Maybe they shouldn't have taken the smokes and the corn. They watched Nute Shelby's face.

Blackie came back. Nobody knew what had taken him into the night or why. He had gone off so strangely. He said, "Well, I reckon I'll turn in. Jude, I've got an extra blanket you can have. You can roll up in it under the wagon—that is if you don't mind Pokey's snoring. He sounds like a hog, particularly when he gets on his back. You'll be warm."

"I'll get along all right, I reckon," Jude said.

Blackie went to a bed roll — a better looking one than most of the others—and hauled a blanket from the crisp tarp. That tarp appeared to be the best. Only his chaps, his torn shirt, and his two guns appeared to be worn. He came to the fire, handing the blanket to Jude.

"Roll up under the wagon, Jude," he said. "Lot better than sleeping down in the willows without one, particularly when you say it's going to rain."

"The creek's going to rise," Jude answered, taking the blanket. "Them cattle oughta be across before it—the water, I mean, comes."

Blackie said to Nute, half seriously, "You heard what he said. It's going to rain. I'm damned if I don't half believe it. Maybe we should have put the herd across after all."

Nute was smoking a cigarette, one from a sack Jude had given the crew. "I'm still running this outfit, Blackie," a little coolly. "I knew enough to let em drink their fill and then shove 'em across. But all the other cow outfits ahead of us thought of the same thing. The grass on the other side is all grazed out. The weather is clear and we can cross in the morning."

"All right. We cross in the morning." And to Jude: "Better get some sleep, Jude. On a trail outfit the cook is first up, long before daylight. He'll be rousting you out to help get a fire going."

Jude took the blanket, and the second one handed him by the old puncher, picked up his now lightened gunnysack, and crawled beneath the wagon. The jug was almost empty. Several riders of the crew were pulling off their boots, Jude not knowing that within a matter of short hours some would be called out to take a "trick," when Mike and the others came in. Nute Shelby still sat on the box, his back to the wagon wheel, smoking thoughtfully and staring into the fire, now a glowing bed of coals. Pokey had finished with the dishes, removed his apron, and was getting his bedroll from another wagon some distance away. Grady was rolling into his own tarp. Jude didn't know that Grady would be called out to take the next trick at night riding.

One has to watch the herd. It was bedded down far out on the grassy prairies, a dark mass to the encircling riders, its fears soothed as long as it heard the reassuring, singing voice of the jogging cowboys. Only lightning and thunder and rain could bring it to its feet; trembling, filled with fear, and ready to bolt. But just let some unusual noise—such as a rattling slicker—break in upon their comfort and they would come quickly erect, tails twisting, bellowing and spooky, ready to bolt.

Jude had listened to the farmers talk about stampedes and he hoped this outfit didn't have one during the final leg of the trip.

He spread the quilt, folded it lengthwise, and removed his shoes. He crawled in between the folds, pulled the blanket over him, and then put his shoes on the ground under the quilt to make a makeshift pillow for his head. Pokey came grunting and crawling in, unrolled his bedroll, the reek of the whiskey strong upon his breath.

"Snug as a skunk in a hollow log," he said in an attempt at friendliness. "I'm shore tired. I c'd sleep fer a week."

"How do you wake up mornings?" Jude wanted to know.

Pokey was tugging off his worn boots. "Practice, son. When you've been a cook fer a hungry bunch of grub hounds all of ten years you git used to wakin' up early, no matter how tired you are. Ain't nobody in the world can beller as loud as a damned cow puncher when his grub is five minutes late. Down on the home ranch when we ain't on roundup I got twenty-two hands to rustle grub for. Keeps a man humpin', I can tell ye."

He sighed and settled down inside his bed.

"Where is it?" Jude asked Pokey

"The ranch? Texas. Salt Fork of the Brazos River."

"Whats it like?"

"If ye mean the ranch, it's just another home made bunch of busted down buildings and dugouts with lots of cows and no money. It'll burn you up in summer, freeze yore bones in winter when the northers come blowin' down from across the Oklahoma Territory, and then when it rains ye bog yer freight wagons down to the hubs in red mud so gummy you got to knock it out with a crowbar and put on a' extra team to git in the clear again. We freight nearly eighty miles and it's one hell of a job, I can tell ye."

"That why you became a cook?" Jude asked shyly.

"Yup. I ain't no fool. I quit ridin' six year ago before some damned knot head of a bronk crippled me up fer life. Ye ain't catchin' this old hoss out in the rain and sleet in the middle of the night when I kin be snugged up in the bunkhouse. Not fer Pokey, it ain't. I got sense. Not like that bunch of grub hounds out there," this for the obvious benefit of the others.

"Oh, yas?" came a jeering voice. "Don't let 'im fool you thataway, Jude. Sense, he says he's got. *Huh!*"

Blackie's gentle voice came from his bedroll beyond the now dying fire. "Don't pay any attention to the old goat, Jude. He's just telling you that in the hope you'll work harder around the wagon and make his job easier. Better watch out for him. He's a sly old fox."

POKEY came up on an elbow, bristling at the laughter. "Yah, yah, yah!" he sneered. "Funny fellers, huh? I'm just tryin' to steer him right so's he won't wind up ridin' the grub line as a busted down tramp puncher like some of you hungry loafers do between busy seasons. I got more money saved away from my wages than the hull lot of ye put together."

"Deductin' of course, what you pay for the ten quarts of whiskey you drink every month," came Cic's gibing voice. "Just imagine him retirin' with his 'fortune' to sit on a hotel porch and watch the hard workin' cow punchers come by. Why, you old polecat, you'll be broke in a month after you retire. Just like that." (finger snap.)

"What the hell are *yu* talkin' about?" Pokey roared. "How much money have *yu* got saved up?"

Nute Shelby's hard, curt voice cut in "Better cut out the jawing and get some sleep, boys. You'll need it."

Then the first faint white flash came far to the west, low on the horizon. Lightning.

Jude saw several forms raise up in the darkness, peering. The white flash came again.

"Lightning," Blackie's voice said. "Jude was right. It's going to rain tonight."

"Someplace else," Nute replied. "The sky is clear. No wind. Better get some sleep."

The camp quieted down. Jude lay there, a little tired now, but unable to sleep. He had, abruptly, been thrown into a different world that was strange to him. He was among men he had, up until now, considered as enemies. That was the farmer in him. But he would go on to Abilene with them, earning his keep by helping Pokey with his wagon duties. After that, he didn't know. He thought of his father and remembered the note he had left. He could picture the elder Gordon finding it, reading it, and then going into a rage.

Drowsiness came upon him and the world blotted out. He slept the sound sleep of the young and growing and of the tired.

Rain splatter upon canvas woke him. That and the sound of a man coming out of his bedroll. Nute Shelby. The foreman was up, jerking on his pants, his eyes seeking upward through the blackness of the night sky. It was overcast, heavy hung with clouds. Jude glanced at the horizon. It was black, pitch black, and ominous looking. In the distance the herd was no longer lowing; it was bawling.

The first clap of thunder came, followed by more lightning. The bawl of the herd increased, a volume of sound that rolled toward them, engulfed them, and went on across the creek to fade away into the night; lost on the flat prairie.

"Up!" Shelby's voice called. He was tugging on a boot now. "Roll out. The herd's going to break. Saddle and ride!"

They came out, grumbling and cursing. A man's voice said, "That nester kid was sure as hell right. He said it was going to rain. What he should have said is that it's going to be a regular storm."

To Jude's surprise Pokey was coming out fast, reaching for his boots. Jude had thought they would stay beneath the wagon. He rolled out too.

"There come the cavvy," Pokey grunted. "Shore glad."

Jude could hear them; between fifty and one hundred horses coming in at a trot, the bell of the lead mare jangling plainly. The rain had increased. The big drops poured down, slapping off the canvas of the wagon and the tarp bed rolls and making funny *plupping* sounds in the ashes of the now dead cook fire. The big drops were spattering off the ground, hitting the grassy earth and bouncing into smaller drops that almost were spray.

"Get harnessed up, Pokey, and get that

damned wagon across the creek before it rises," Nute Shelby yelled. "Hurry it up, men. Get back of that herd and if it wants to stampede, send it north. We'll round 'em up later. Get going!"

THEY got going. Jude had never realized that men could move so fast. He saw scrambling cow punchers rolling up tarp bedrolls and running toward the bedroll wagon. By now he was on his feet, his shoes with strings awkwardly tied—never in his life had he seen men move so fast—, and watching Pokey. The cook was grabbing up pots and pans and literally tossing them into the chuckwagon. Jude jumped in to give him a hand and in a matter of minutes Pokey was lifting up the hinged chuckboard and fastening it into place.

"The harness is all laid out in front of the wagon," Pokey bellowed. "Grab the two front bridles and I'll get the wheelers."

They ran for the front of the wagon. Horses by the dozen were milling around the remuda corral and a man was down by the opening, cursing while he worked at the rope knot on the gate. Men were saddling like mad. The sound of the bawling herd came louder. The remuda milled and Jude saw a black faced rider: a Negro.

"They're going to stampede," called somebody's voice. "Let's roll, boys."

Jude found the bridles, laid out beyond the end of the wagon tongue. He grabbed them up, the leather familiar to his hand. He was, after all, a farmer; and this was something that he understood.

"Which ones?" he called to Pokey as the two of them ran toward the corral. The Negro was spurring hard at a run around the outer circle of the milling remuda. Some of the "bunch quitters" were trying to get away. That was one of the tough jobs of a wrangler: the bane of his life were bunch quitters. As long as they knew you were watching them they'd stay put. But just let them get the idea you were loafing in the shade of your horse, taking things easy, and they'd start an unobtrusive graze off in the direction of the nearest gully. The Negro flashed past, a lean dark form in the saddle.

"Which ones?" Jude called again.

"That grey and black," the cook bellowed. "You can catch 'em with a bridle. I won't have a team I can't catch. Whoa, now, Gert! Stand still. Come here, you old fool! It's me . . . Pokey."

Jude spotted the Grey and called, "Whoa, boy," and started herding him in. But it was a storm and the grey wasn't going to be caught. Then, right over his head, a rope sang out and settled squarely over the recalcitrant one's neck. The Negro hauled up, and even in the darkness, still split by lightning flashes, Jude could see his friendly grin.

"There you are, boy," called the night wrangler. "Take the rope offen his head and I'll get you the other."

Jude bridled with sure fingers and slipped off the noose. The Negro coiled his rope and a wizened little man, also with bridles, called out, "Dam' you, Bugger, let the kid catch his and you try giving me a hand."

It was "All Alone," the crippled ex-puncher who drove the bedroll wagon.

All Alone limped badly and couldn't get around much.

"Sure will, Mistuh Alone. Just a minute till I spot 'em."

The horses were still milling around the remuda corral. Most of the riders already had saddled and disappeared into the night. Two men were tearing down the rope lines of the remuda corral, coiling the wet rope and yanking at the stakes. They were cursing as they ran pantingly, dragging the stuff toward the bedroll wagon. Peanut, the day wrangler, another dried up old timer unfit for regular riding, was helping the Negro night wrangler to hold the remuda. Jude came out leading the black and grey by the bridles. He trotted off toward the wagon, discovering to his surprise that Pokey already was there, harnessing fast.

Jude swung his mounts into place and felt with sure hands for the harness on the grounds. His strong young hands worked fast with collars and hames and back bands. He backed the team into place in front of the wheelers and was back to harness the second of them. He couldn't see Pokey's look of surprise in the night. Pokey had been boasting that he could harness a team faster than any man that ever walked on two legs.

"Look out for Gert on the right side," he called as Jude went in to hook the trace chains. "She'll kick the head off anybody but me."

She didn't kick Jude. He already was in

between them, hooking the chains. The four stood strung out, ready to go. Pokey grabbed the lines and went up over the hub of the left front wheel and Jude vaulted into the seat beside him. Off in the night came the drum of hoofs and that ominous bawling. All Alone wasn't quite ready.

"Hurry it up," roared Pokey to the frantically limping man. "We got to git acrost that crick and clear the herd or they'll be on top of us."

ALL ALONE hurled back a curse and Jude jumped from the seat, hitting the now wet ground. He ran forward and ducked in, giving the bedroll wagon driver a hand.

"Let's go!" came the cook's bellowing voice. "Let's get out of here."

All Alone went up, taking the lines Jude handed him. The team was stomping and snorting, a little frightened.

"Ridin' with me, kid?" he called down.

"I'll go with Pokey," Jude called and back. He vaulted up again and Pokey's booted foot slashed hard at the iron brake handle, unlocking it.

"Git!" he bawled . . . and they "got."

The four horse team hit the traces and the big chuckwagon lurched forward with a snap that threw Jude's head back.

"Git!" Pokey roared again, slashing the lines down on their galloping rumps. "Roll out of here, you lousy busted down bunch of bones!"

They went out at a gallop, broke into a run, and Jude clung to the side of the seat, aware that this was the wildest ride a man ever took. Beside him Pokey sat with both legs braced, hauling and sawing at the lines while he peered throught the rainy darkness. They crashed through a clump of brush and then hit some kind of a mound. The wheels went high into the air and then hit with a jar that shook Jude's spine.

They were heading due north, straight for the creek a quarter of a mile away. Pokey began shouting, "Whoa, now," and pulling back hard on the lines. But the running team were stretched out in full stride and wouldn't stop. The cook slapped on the brakes and the locked rear wheels slid through the mud and grass .The waters of the creek were just ahead.

Pokey got the panting team down to something resembling a trot and then released the brake again. Jude looked back. All Alone; in the lighter bedroll wagon, was just back of them.

"Git!" Pokey bellowed. "Git on in there," slapping the lines down on their rumps.

But the horses that had but, seconds before, been running now displayed a strange disinclination to continue forward. The leaders were rearing and fighting the bits. Twenty feet ahead of them the dark waters of the creek lapped at the grass. Probably a cloud burst up above, Jude thought. The waters were up and rising still faster.

Pokey fought them and they almost got tangled up in the harness. "They won't cross," Pokey yelled. "The dam' fools have been through this before but they're still afraid of water. Git! Git! Gert, git out of it and come on across."

Jude leaned back, twisting around in the seat. His sack was just back of it where he first had tossed it before helping the cook put in the cooking pots. He brought out the coiled bull whip. Twenty feet of plaited leather. From the time his father had brought it home three years before the blacksnake had held a strange fascination for him. To his farmer boy eyes it was more than just a whip. It was a thing alive, its sleek, plaited length something to be revered.

He had used that whip much, practicing hour after hour. He wore out popper after popper, replacing them with knife cut strips of tanned rawhide, snapping away at fence posts and any other object within reach. He could throw it out with a curling motion of his arm, wrapping the coils around the neck of a milk pen calf without hurting it, and then hauling it away from the cow while his mother sat milking and smiling at the vagaries of such a son. When she had wanted a chicken killed Jude never wrang its neck. He simply had gone out into the yard back of the house and snapped its head off with the beloved bull whip. Later he had tried holding a match between thumb and index finger of his left hand and then cutting it in two with the end of the popper. A few experiences with a slashed left hand hadn't discouraged him. He waited until the injury healed, wrapped a towel around his left hand, and went back to practice with the blacksnake. And once he had lit the head af a match so held, a feat that sent him around for days boasting to his mother.

He uncoiled the whip now, sitting beside Pokey in the balked chuckwagon. Its twenty foot length went out, trailing in the wet grass, and then it sang forward. He could make out the outlines of their rumps in the night. Gert leaped forward and the others fell in. They hit the night waters of the rapidly rising creek, fighting and sloshing; And Jude coiled the blacksnake once more. Three minutes later they were across. The dripping team strained and struggled up the incline and Pokey, a look of astonishment on his face, wheeled them around on a rise and looked back.

In the night the rumble of a stampeding herd came above the roar of the storm.

"Almighty God!" the cook cried out. They're running *south!* The boys couldn't turn 'em!"

CHAPTER V

THE team pulling the bedroll wagon had quite willingly followed the chuckwagon across the now turbulent waters. Jude had looked back and, in the light of the lightning flashes, could see it half floating, the water up above the floor bed. Those bedrolls, hastily flung in as their owners ran for the remuda corral were soaking wet, he knew.

The wizened, crippled driver rocked up alongside of them, almost hub to hub. He hauled back on the lines and looked across at Jude and Pokey.

"Wonder what time it is?" he called.

" 'Bout three o'clock," Pokey grunted. "Seems to me they broke kind of sudden."

"That's what I was thinkin'. Lord help them boys out there. Son," this to Jude, "don't you ever get any fool ideas about becoming a cow puncher. It's a dog's life. You stick with farmin'."

Jude didn't answer. He sat in the pelting rain, wet all the way to the skin, listening. Far to the south the rumble of the running herd was broken by sharp popping sounds.

"What's that?" he asked Pokey.

"Six shooters. They're tryin' to turn 'em with gunfire. Sometimes it works and sometimes it don't. Well, let's make camp and get a fire goin'. The boys'll be stragglin' in purty soon and'll want coffee and lots of it. Git, Maud! Come on . . . git!"

The huge chuckwagon lurched and went into motion toward a rise visible on the dark wet horizon a quarter of a mile to the west. Beyond was a dark mass of stunted prairie trees.

"Got to git clear of the crossin'," the cook explained to Jude. "Don't want no damn trail herd of three thousand steers runnin' over my camp."

They hauled up on the gentle rise, the bedroll wagon back of them. It was still raining. Jude could feel the water hitting his soaked shirt and running down the length of his spine. He jumped down and felt the wetness of the grass sink into his shoes.

"What'll we do with the team?" he asked, unhooking them.

"Unharness and put on hobbles," Pokey said. "I'll get 'em out of the wagon. The wranglers'll probably hold the remuda on the other side to give the boys fresh mounts. They can swim 'em across in the mornin'. Lord, what a night."

Jude's strong young hands worked at the harness. He slid it off their wet rumps and put it on the front wheels, out of the mud. Pokey was down in front, working at their forefeet. The six mounts made awkward, jumping movements and disappeared into the rain filled night and the little crippled man came over. He took off his streaming hat and wiped the rain from his face with a soaked sleeve.

"Hell of a night," he commented.

Pokey had taken a tarp and ropes from the wagon and was rigging a shelter from the left rear wheel.

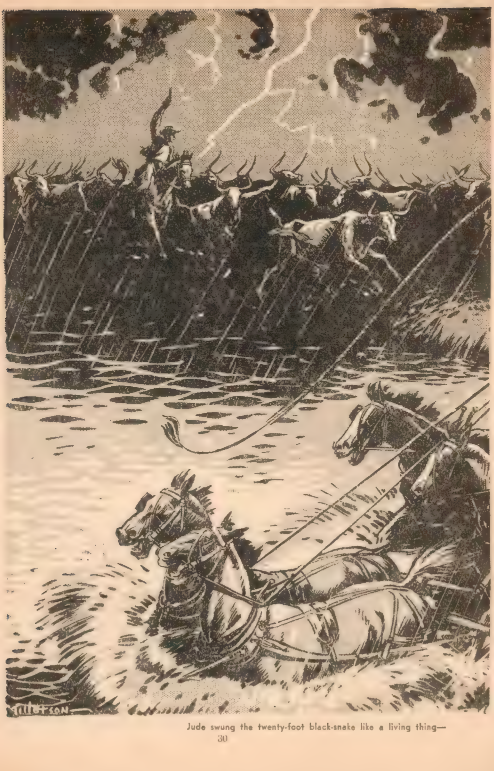
"If you got an ax and a lantern handy I'll try to cut and split some dry wood," Jude offered.

"No need to, son. I allus carry dried cow chips and some wood in the wagon for just such cases like this. Comes in handy on a roundup, in case of rain. Here . . . take this ax and drive in these iron stakes while I git the lantern lit and the wood out."

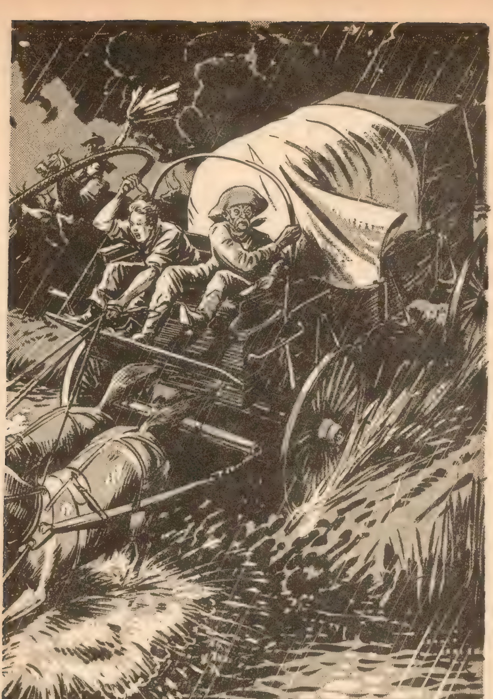
They got the shelter rigged and the cook brought out a glass jug of kerosene. It seemed that the range wise old Pokey was prepared for almost any emergency. In a matter of minutes the three of them were warming themselves over a fire blazing beneath the tarp shelter. Pokey went for the huge coffee pot.

"The rain's lettin' up," he finally said.

Grey dawn broke over a rolling, undulating prairie land, soaked to the core.



Jude swung the twenty-foot black-snake like a living thing—



and the terror-stricken horses surged against the rising stream

The canvas on the two wagons drooped dispiritedly, heavy with wetness. A quarter of a mile south of them the flood creek waters roiled past, carrying debris and floating cottonwoods. Normally the creek was forty yards wide and three feet deep. It was one hundred and fifty yards of brown, swirling waters now.

Cattle, tired out from the run, began to straggle in sight on the south horizon They gathered into miserable, bawling groups, which grew in size, and presently riders put in appearance. One of them was Blackie. He had a man in front of him in the saddle. They came to the creek's edge and Blackie slid off. He waded out into the stream while the other man sat drunkenly. The horse hesitated and then went in. Jude saw Blackie's hand on the horn, swimming alongside the horse, being carried downstream. But they got across witout too much difficulty. They landed one hundred and fifty yards below the starting point and Blackie, his leather chaps soaked to sogginess, came on, leading the mount. He pulled up as the three men at the wagons went out to give him a hand.

They hauled the half unconscious man out of the saddle and carried him to the shelter.

"Horse fell on him, huh?" Pokey asked.

"No," Blackie replied. "He's been shot."

"Shot! Who the hell did it? One of the boys trying to turn the steers?"

"It was no accident, Pokey. The herd was stampeded by a rider waving a slicker. God, that coffee smells good."

HE POURED himself a cup from the steaming pot while the cook went to work on the wounded man. The crippled little driver of the other wagon—his name was Joe—was over spreading soggy bedrolls all over the place. In a matter of hours the sun would come out, boiling hot. The sky was clear, the rain gone. Jude bustled about the wagon, helping the cook get breakfast. The Negro night wrangler and Peanut put the cavvy across shortly after sunup, after holding them across the creek the rest of the night. It was bunched on a hill two hundred yards away. the bunch quitters for once showing no inclination to wander off. Riders began to straggle in, wet, tired, and hungry. They ate in silence, changed horses, and swam back again to work the rapidly growing herd. At ten o'clock Nute Shelby rode up. He swung down, and like the others, went straight to the fire. His face was grim. There was grimness all over the place. The wounded man lay on his back on his soggy bedroll, out in the sun now.

"Any missin'?" Pokey asked.

Pokey, like any chuckwagon cook, held a special place in the outfit. Any other man talking to the taciturn foreman at a time like this, might have fared differently.

"Two hundred head, I reckon," Shelby said.

"How can you tell?" Jude asked.

The trail boss looked up from his plate and a half smile came over his hard, practical face, "well it's like this, son," he said. "Some critters are marked differently. You got a brindle steer, a few big black ones, maybe one with a slash of white along it's flanks. You got to know them. I call 'em markers. We got about twenty head in this herd that we know by sight. Then when they stampede like they did and we round up, we start lookin' for markers. We got two missing. You can always figger that when a marker don't show up there's anywhere from fifty to a hundred head with him. Savvy?"

"Yessir," Jude said.

"They didn't look like they're in a mind to cross," Pokey said. "All tired out, mad, and bawlin'. You got a job cut out fer yu, I'm thinkin'."

"We'll get 'em across," the trail boss said.

He rose from his haunches, placed plate and knife and fork in the big pan of water provided for that purpose, went to his horse. He swung up and loped toward the distant remuda, his mount's hoofs throwing up mud gobs.

"There goes a good man," Joe remarked.

"Yah," Pokey replied. "A good cowman . . . and about as sociable as a Mexican fighting cock. But he's all right," he finished.

It was decided to try and put the herd accross about noon. The waters had subsided somewhat, but were still high. Riders were out on fresh horses, far to the south, scouring the country for the missing strays. They would hold the herd until the strays were found. They and one rider. A man named Webbly hadn't shown up.

Then, just before noon, he put in appearance. He lay face down across one of the other men's saddle. His horse too had been killed. The two of them had gone down in a futile effort to try and turn the madly running herd. Jude felt queer inside when they brought him in and laid him out over by the chuckwagon tongue. He wasn't a day more than twenty-four. Jude turned away, sick inside. Grady was eating near the fire.

"What's the matter, farmer?" he jeered. "Never saw a dead man before? You'll see plenty if you stay around the cow country long enough."

"You shut up," Pokey said.

"You go to hell," Grady said sourly. "I was a nester once myself and I'll talk as I damn please."

He swaggered over to the dirty dish pan, tossed in his plate and knife and fork, and mounted, heading for the cavvy and a fresh horse. Pokey said, "I never liked that big snot. Son, I got a grubbin' hoe and spade here. Maybe you better go up on the hill and start diggin' a grave for Webbly. Six feet long and three wide. I'll try to fix up a headboard with his name branded on it. I'll use a piece of iron to etch in the letterin'."

JUDE took the implements and walked over toward the opposite slope, lying west of them. He found strange emotions filling him to the brim. This was a kind of thing he never before had encountered. A man was killed, doing his job, and they had to bury him within a short distance of where he fell because there were three thousand wild Texas steers to be pushed on to the buyer, the loading pens, and the eastern slaughterhouses. The east was crying for Texas beef. Jude found a spot beneath the outspreading branches of a mesquite tree and began to dig.

He dug for two hours, pausing now and then to wipe the sweat from his face. The sun was out, hot after the night storm. The good earth seemed to be steaming. He looked down across the swell of the prairie. The creek was still up and the riders had, for the last half hour, been trying to fight them across. But the herd had balked. Even the two great black steers, leaders of the herd, refused to budge. They were tired, hungry, and angry. Jude got the grave down to four feet and went down to dinner. The body of Webbly, now covered with a canvas tarp, still lay where it had been placed. The wounded man smoked complacently, his right thigh bound in bandages made from washed flour sacks. The riders swam across by turns and ate hungrily.

The herd was at an impasse.

"Never saw 'em so damned stubborn," Pokey commented to nobody in particular. "Guess they're gittin' all tired out. But that's a cow critter fer yu. We git within a hundred and fifty miles of Abilene and they balk. Guess we'll have to wait until the creek goes down."

Jude spoke up from his plate. He was sitting alongside Blackie. "I can tell you how to get them across . . . I think," he said hesitatingly.

There were seven men at the fire. Seven pairs of eyes swung and focused themselves on his young face. Nute Shelby paused over his plate.

"Yeah?" he said.

"It's what an Indian once told me," Jude got out hurriedly and a little timidly. "They were driving two hundred head of Government bought cattle to the reservation and run into a creek like this one, all swollen with water after a hard rain."

Shelby had continued eating. He said nothing. Jude dropped his face to his plate.

"How did they do it, Jude?" Blackie's soft voice asked. "A man's never too old to learn. I figured Indians as knowing more about cattle than cow punchers, but then you never can tell. Me . . . I've got an open mind. It never hurts to listen. How did they do it?"

"Well," Jude was talking directly to Blackie now, "it seems like when they wouldn't cross these Indians went down into the willows and cut a bunch of clubs. They beat the first bunch of lead steers across and the others followed right along. He said it was easy because the cattle didn't like to have those clubs bouncing off their heads. He was some kind of minor chief and spoke pretty good English. Lots of them come by our place," he added.

Blackie's face lifted. His eyes met those of Nute Shelby. He said, "Well, Nute?"

"I'm still running the outfit, Blackie. We'll put 'em across after dinner. They get hungry enough from being bunched and they'll cross."

Jude got up and put away his eating

utensils. "I guess I better get back to the digging," he said to Blackie. "I'm down four feet now."

Shelby's voice came from across the fire. "That's deep enough so's the coyotes won't get him. Don't waste anymore time. We've got more important things to think of. You and Joe pack him up there, kid. Soon's we get the herd across I'll hold burial services and we'll get on our way."

They changed horses again and went back across the still swiftly running waters. Jude, under Pokey's directions, to an ax and went west, past the grave, into the mesquites. He began cutting and piling wood. An hour later Peanut rode up. Peanut was sixty if he was a day, and though Jude had no way of knowing it Peanut had watched Major-General Jeb Stuart receive his mortal wound at Yellow Tavern in the wild fight with Sheridan's cavalry.

"How are you-all, son?" the wrangler asked, reining up.

"Pretty good," Jude said. "How are you making out with the cattle?"

Peanut was taking down his rope, building a large loop in his small but powerful hands. He shook it out until its spread touched the ground.

"Ah reckon they ain't," he said. "Crittuhs can be powerful ornery sometimes. Heah. Put this heah rope around 'bout ten of them sticks theah and ah'll drag 'em ovuh to the wagon. Nevuh see sech a belly ackuh as thet Pakey. He worries moah about wood than ah do about who lost the wahr between the States. I'll send that nigguh Buggah ovah fo' the rest. It ain't his job, him bein' the night wrangler, but I brought that nigguh west with me when he wasn't moah'n a pickaninny an' he'll jump when ah pop the whip."

JUDE took the loop and fastened it around enough of the dry wood to make a good load. Peanut turned, dallying around the saddle horn. The rope tightened and the cow horse, straining away, moved toward the chuckwagon with the load dragging away behind. Twenty minutes later the Negro youth came loping up. He gave Jude a friendly grin.

"How you makin' out, boy?" he asked.

"Pretty good. Peanut said he'd send you over. You want me to loop up this wood?"

"That Peanut. Now there's a man fo' you." Bugger was swinging down. "Nobody around this camp knows it but my mammy and pappy wuz slaves of his family down in Gawgie-uh until Mistuh Lincoln freed 'em. Peanut's real name is Cunnel Edward Sutherworth. But that country sho' was in bad shape after the wahr. So the Cunnel stuck around for a few years an' finally he ups and decides to come out west. He tol' my mammy and pappy, "You's freed now but ah'll take this Bugger with me out west,' so heah we is. We been rovin' 'round the country evuh since, me an' the Cunnel, which is how come ah turned up as night wrangulah on this heah outfit. Cunnel got me the job."

He was smoking a cigarette from the tobacco Jude had given the men, bending to loop the rope. He pulled it up tight around the last of the wood and swung up again, strong and lithe in the saddle, with seemingly not a care in the world. He looked down at Jude.

"Heah comes Grady. Wonder whut he wants? Look heah, white boy, don't you say nuthin' about what I tol' you about the Cunnel bein' a Cunnel. He's Peanuts, an' nobody asts questions about who a man is or wheah he come fum."

"I understand," Jude said.

"Fine. Cunnel knew I tol' you that an' he'd skin my black hide right off my black backside."

CHAPTER VI

GRADY reined up and looked down at Jude. "Gimme that ax, farmer, and be quick about it."

Jude stared back at the bigger youth. He didn't like Grady at all; he liked him less and less every time they met.

"I ain't keeping it from you," he said. "There it is."

"Hand it up here."

"You were sent up to get it. I ain't keeping you from getting it."

Bugger rocked in the saddle. "Wha-wha-wha!" he roared with laughter, slapping his thigh. "That li'l ol' farmer boy he sho' done tol' you where to head in. 'I ain't keepin' you-all fum it,' he says. *Wha-wha-wha!*"

Grady turned on him fiercely. "You shut yore dirty lousy mouth," he snarled, "or I'll fix you plenty."

"You-all'll fix nothin', white man. You

gits funny with me an' Peanut'll just nat'ully blow yo' head right off. You-all'd look funny walkin' around widout a head. Just like a dawg-goned chicken whut got it chopped off fo' the Sunday dinner pot. Wha-wha-wha!"

Grady snarled at him again and rode over, bending from the saddle. He almost made it, fumbling on the ground, and then had to dismount to pick up the implement. He swung up again, holding it across the saddle in front of him.

"If you wasn't just a tramp maverick I'd beat yore head off," he sneered. "An' I think I'll do it anyhow when we git to Abilene."

"I expect," Jude said, "that one reason you're bluffing is because of what Blackie would do to you. But you don't have to worry. I won't let him take a hand. So you can get down and take off that gunbelt anytime."

"I ain't got time. Nute wants this ax. But I'll get you yet." Grady wheeled and loped away, down toward the creek.

Bugger was grinning like a black gargoyle. "I sho' wish he'd a called yo' booger, boy. Dawg-goned if ah don't think you-all could give 'im a round or two."

He leaned his hard, lithe body to one side and let the rope tighten. The wood began to move on its way to Pokey's domain. Bugger most likely couldn't read or write, having had little opportunity for education either before the former Confederate Colonel picked him up and certainly not afterward. But in Jude's opinion the Negro wrangler was as good a rider and roper and a better man than Grady.

He stood watching as the jogging horse passed the bedroll wagon, coming up. Joe had hooked up the team, put the dead man into his bedroll, and was bringing him up. He hauled up beside the grave and found Jude waiting. Joe got limpingly down and went around to the back, letting down the tail gate.

"We might as well leave him in outa the sun until Nute and the boys get here," he said. "And that might be quite awhile from the looks of things. Nothing to do but wait."

He sat down in the shade of the wagon and removed his hat to reveal a bald head, then rolled a smoke. Jude rolled one too, his eyes on the distant herd. Grady was back across now and Jude saw Nute Shelby waving his hands toward the willows. The buck-toothed, foul mouthed puncher swung down near a screen of willows and began to slash away. Fifteen minutes later he had several clubs of about four feet in length and from an inch to two inches in diameter. Riders rode up and each took a club. They spurred into the head of the heard and the clubs began to thud off red hides and bounce off backs and noses. A new note rose in the distant bawling. Three riders rushed a small group and, under a hail of blows, the steers broke. They pushed out into the stream and began to swim. The clubs flailed anew and more followed.

The heard was on its way across.

Joe sat there watching the dripping twenty-eight hundred lumber by nearly a mile to the east. He said, "Well, I'll be damned. Now I've seen everything. And me workin' cattle since we started rounding up unbranded mavericks right after the close of the war."

Five of the riders broke away from the heard and galloped to the chuckwagon. Jude could see Nute Shelby talking to Pokey from the saddle. He was gesticulating. Pokey handed him something from the wagon and then the trail boss turned toward one of the men and again said something; an order of some kind. The rider — it was Grady — started loping toward the four hobbled chuckwagon mounts grazing some distance to the north.

"We're movin' out," Joe announced. "Here comes Nute and Blackie and Cic and Mike. Guess that's the buryin' party." He rose to his feet and put on his hat.

The four riders came up at a fast trot and swung down. Nute Shelby looked at Jude in a strange kind of way and said nothing. He rapped out to Joe, "Get him out of there and into the ground, Joe. We've lost more than a half day and got to get rolling."

Jude sprang to the back and together he and the limping little man carried the tarp covered figure in its blankets and lowered it into the hole. The men gathered around and the trail boss took a Bible from his belt where it had been shoved down inside against his stomach.

He read a very short burial service, closed the book, and looked at the others, putting on his hat. "Blackie, you and the boys get back to the herd. Jude, you fill in this grave with the shovel. Joe, get rolling and load up them bedrolls and the ropes and stuff for the corral. Pokey's getting ready to hitch up. Get that grave filled up as soon as you can, Jude, then go down and give Pokey a hand. That's all, boys."

IN TWO minutes Jude was left alone. He went to work, filling in the shallow grave, and trying his best to make the mound neat and uniform. He picked up the tools and made his way down to the wagon. Pokey already was hooked and loaded. One of the men was helping Joe with the corral ropes.

"All right, Jude, let's roll," the cook said. "Climb up, son."

Jude went up over a hub and Pokey said "Here, hold this."

It was a small board from a precious pile he kept for kindling, made from a goods box. On it, burned with a heated iron stake, were the words, *Webbly, from Texas.*

That was all. They stopped at the grave long enough to put it at the head, sinking it down about half way and knowing that a few more rain storms such as last night would soon have it awry, the grave partly caved in. Jude was filled with a strange sadness as Pokey yelled, "Git!" and they went out at a fast trot.

They passed the leaders and rolled on, the water barrels sloshing wildly. Several miles from the still swollen creek they made dry camp that night, supper being ready by the time the tired, worn out riders came in. There was no talk that night. Exhausted men ate silently and wolfishly, smoked a cigarette, and promptly sought their tarps. Jude bustled about, trying to appear busy when Nute Shelby's eyes were on him, for he half feared the curt trail boss. He washed the dishes as fast as they were dirtied, a job that sometimes each man did for himself, since it saved needed time for the cook. The dishes done he went beneath the wagon, where the new supply of wood had been lashed, brought out some and chopped wood for the morning fire. He worked steadily and silently, unaware that the eyes of the trail boss and Blackie were upon him, the former in speculation, the latter in satisfaction. He had saved them hours of precious time with the herd, quite unaware of the importance of it.

They rolled away from the bedding grounds at daylight the next morning with everything going smoothly, the wounded rider in the bedroll wagon with Joe. There had been no more talk about the shooting. But there was an ominous something about it that spelled trouble. Nobody made any speculations that you could hear. The two hundred head were gone, their tracks washed out by the rain.

The herd moved on and more miles of the flat country fell back of them to be lost in the distance. It was a day to day repetition of hard, tedious work, but to Jude Gordon it was a new world. He kept his eyes and ears open and learned things about horses and men and ranches and how cattle were handled. He heard talk about scab and how you shot a scrub range bull on sight so he wouldn't breed his puny strain into beef cattle. He heard stories of gunfights and gun fighters, of dance-halls and girls who worked in them, practicing two professions, dancing and the oldest in the world; and when this last named was mentioned he saw the buck-toothed Grady lick his lips and grin.

"Whiskey ain't the only thing I'm goin' to buy me when I git to Abilene either," he had grinned. "I got a lot of lost time to make up fer."

"Hmp!" sneered Pokey bitingly. "Ye better take a dam' fool's advice and keep away from 'em. All yu'll git is somethin' that'll have ye walkin' goofy-eyed fer three months. Dam' all women, say I. The bad ones'll take ye and the good ones'll keep ye broke with a bull ring in yer nose."

"How do *you* know so much about it?" Grady jeered back.

"I had three wives," snapped the cook. "Two good ones and one from the honky-tonks. Personally, I'd take a quart of panther juice anytime."

And the days rolled on until the noon when the herd lumbered across a small rise and found itself on the plains before Abilene.

Abilene was a rough, tough town that they had all seen before; with pleasure and anticipation they looked forward to seeing it again. There was very little that a man couldn't do if he wanted to, in this rugged cow-town.

CHAPTER VII

NUTE SHELBY rode with Blackie at point when they first sighted Abilene in the distance, miles away across the flat prairie. The foreman was more worried than he cared to admit. Beneath his hard, taciturn exterior he wasn't just quite sure what the next move would be. Reports had drifted down the trail that you didn't have to worry about cars; there were plenty. And buyers aplenty too. He didn't exactly know what the next move should be. All the way up the trail, fighting the elements across the long miles of Texas and then on through Oklahoma Territory into Kansas he had been too much occupied with the problems at hand. Get the herd through. Come hell or high water, get the herd through.

There had been plenty of hell and there had been plenty of high water. He was still remembering the creek of one hundred and fifty miles back and how a green nester kid in overalls had shown them how to cross it.

Blackie, riding beside him, seemed to read his thoughts. The eyes of both men went to the chuckwagon off to the left, two hundred yards away, keeping pace with the leaders. Normally Pokey wrapped up his four and hit out ahead, judging the distance the herd would make between meals, and preparing accordingly. But now there was no reaon for them to go on. That nester kid had been here three times before and had led them unerringly. Without him they might have missed the town by fifteen or twenty miles.

"He's a good kid." Shelby finally admitted. They could see Jude riding in the seat with Pokey.

"He's got something all right," Blackie said. "That kid's got the makings of a good cow hand, Nute. I'd like to take him back with us."

"If he wants to go," grunted the trail boss.

"Sure. If he wants to go."

Then silence again. Back of them the leaders plodded on. The twenty-eight hundred were strung out for more than a mile. The trail boss was sick over the loss of those two hundred head during the storm and stampede. Shelby's eyes swept the plain. Just one herd out there in the distance. Again Blackie seemed to read what was in the other's mind.

"Takes a lot of time to load a herd," Blackie commented. "Jude saw two go by within a week. No telling how many more were coming in from other directions. Five of what you owe me gets you one of what the old man is going to get out of this herd says that's the NP outfit over there. Waiting for cars. Ten more of what I've got coming says those two hundred lost head will turn up here with our T4 brand on their hides. Want to bet?"

"Maybe they rebranded," grunted Shelby.

"Who?"

"Rustlers. Never heard of rustlers working close to a shipping point, but anything can happen in this business. They could rebrand and run in with another herd."

"They were two days ahead of us. And we lost hours until that nester kid showed us how to get across Gramma Creek."

"I know."

The answer was short, typical of the trail boss. The loss of those two hundred cattle was a sore spot with him. He lived for cattle. He'd been entrusted with three thousand prime steers and he was showing up with a two hundred head shortage. It didn't matter that a man couldn't figure on the elements. The fact that they were gone because of a storm meant little in the trail boss's way of thinking. The NP outfit had beaten him in, and were waiting for cars. And Harrison, their head, was a tough man; a sneering, vindictive man.

"If I could get a look at some of that NP stuff and see any signs of fresh rebranding," Blackie said, "it wouldn't be much trouble to shoot a steer and skin it. Our old T4 brand would show beneath the hide."

"And have a fight on our hands. Not in this town. Wild Bill Hickock is marshal and from what I hear he's a bad man to tangle with. Don't you worry about the two hundred head. We'll have a few days and I'm keeping my eyes open. I got a hunch they'll show up. Well, I'd better go over and tell Pokey where to put the wagon. Grass looks good two miles east of here. We'll try it anyhow. Tell the wing men to start swinging them. Get the leaders over and we'll pull in about two miles west of the herd down there."

He rode off at a gallop, toward the rumbling chuckwagon. Blackie turned in the saddle and threw up his hand in signal to the right wing man on the east side, two hundred yards to the rear. A light rain had fallen the night before and there was a little dust. Blackie turned to the west, the two big, dark colored steers now acknowledged as leaders instinctively following the horse. The right wing man had taken down his coiled rope from the saddle. He doubled it and began whacking steers on their lean rumps.

"Ho-ho-ho," he called, striking right and left at the bobbing rumps. The bellows increased but the head of that long line of steers, sinuous like the curve of a snake's body, swung to the west. They plodded on. Back along the flank men caught the relayed signal and acted accordingly. The drag was far behind. Nearly one hundred head of sore footed and limping steers, the latter victims of the late stampede in the rain at Gramma Creek. Two riders were bringing them up. Four hundred yards to the rear of the chuckwagon came the cavvy herded at a grazing pace by the former Confederate Colonel and the Negro he had brought with him out of "Gawg-ia." Bugger was too filled with excitement to sleep the day through.

FOR this was the end of the long trail for all of them. Their first time up. That nester kid certainly knew the country, all right!

Nute Shelby pulled up alongside the right front wheel of the wagon.

"There she is, boss," Pokey called down. "And it looks like we got visitors." "Looks that way," grunted the trail boss.

"Cattle buyers," Jude said to Pokey. "They'll be in on you like bees."

"We're turning the herd," Shelby said, working his horse in close to the lumbering four horse chuckwagon. "Swing over and camp somewhere about two miles west of that other herd over there. Fix supper for about six men. The rest of the boys will be eating in town, I reckon."

"Aw, hell, Nute," Pokey protested. "Let 'em get their own supper tonight. I got business in town."

The riders, three of them, were now but a hundred yards away; men in city clothes and the kind of stovepipe hats Lincoln had worn. Jude, sitting in the seat beside the cook, wondered how a man could keep one of those hats straight while riding at a gallop. Strung out on the plain back of them were two more groups. More cattle buyers. The trail boss's confidence suddenly took an upsurge

But he was still Shelby, the man who had brought them through. He said, "That's too dam' bad, Pokey, but some of the boys have got to hold this herd. Everybody can't go into town. And they've got to eat. I . . ."

The first of the group, of buyers came up. He was a florid faced man with long, dark sideburns on his cheeks.

"Pardon me, sir," he said. "But where can I find the man in charge of this herd?"

"You're looking at him," Nute Shelby said, curtly.

"Glad to meet you, sir. My name's Willoughby. I represent the Willoughby Cattle Company. Shippers, you know. We'd like to buy this herd. Every hoof. And we pay cash."

He named a price that left the trail boss's mouth slightly open. Shelby cleared his throat. Twenty-eight hundred head at . . .

"Tell him not to take it," Jude's voice said. "He can get more."

He had intended it as a whisper to Pokey. But the words had carried. Other men in derby and beaver hats were coming up. Shelby hesitated.

"Hold it, sir," cried out a man topped by a beaver. "I'm prepared to pay you more."

The third came up. "Gentlemen," he cried, and this appeared to be directed at Shelby and Pokey and Jude as well. "I have a full crew of men to take charge of this herd, if you'll sell it to me . . ."

Jude saw the trail boss relax suddenly. He almost lounged in the saddle. Three men began to bid. The last man to arrive was short and wiry. His presence seemed to be resented by the others.

"I've got a full crew of men to take over this herd, sir," he cried to the now lounging trail boss. "I'll pay on the hoof according to your count. Cash on the barrel head."

Nute Shelby ignored him. He turned to Pokey. "Maybe," he said in the softest voice Jude ever imagined he could speak, even to the cook, "you won't have to fix supper after all, Pokey." And to the man: "Mister, you've just bought yourself about twenty-eight hundred head of Texas steers. Get your crew out here and take over."

"Thank you, sir. My company pays the highest prices."

"This time. Maybe not next time." And to the two unsuccessful bidders: "Sorry, men. The herd's sold." And again to the buyer: "That's the herd and nothing else.

The cavvy and wagons stay with the outfit."

"Agreed, sir. Stand by while I return to town for my men."

"One moment," Nute Shelby called as the buyer wheeled his horse.

"Yes?"

"I said twenty-eight hundred. That don't include the two lead steers. They're going back to Texas with the wagons. I might need 'em again some time."

"They're all yours, mister.'"

The man who had just bought the herd loped away, followed by the others at a disgruntled trot. Pokey licked his lips. "I'll put the wagon in close to town so's in case the boys want any grub it'll be handy."

A fleeting grin crossed the trail boss's pleased face. "I can imagine," he said, about how much cooking *you'll* be doing while we're here."

He turned and galloped off.

CHAPTER VIII

THE hotel room was the biggest in the place, almost twenty-five feet square. It was on the second floor, on a corner overlooking the street. From below came the sounds of a town that was busy in late afternoon and preparing for more business as night came on. Jude stood in his overalls, back to the wall, and looked at the men grouped about Shelby.

The trail boss sat at a small table, a kind of tally book in front of him. Beside it was piled more money than Jude had ever thought existed. The ragged riders, fifteen of them, were crowded around, their eyes bright with eagerness and expectation. As each man was paid off he hurried out. Some were making for the first bar to start loading up on whiskey. Others were heading for the nearest store to outfit themselves with new clothes before doing the town. Near where Jude stood the Negro Bugger waited beside Peanut, the day wrangler. Peanut who once had worn the uniform of a Confederate Colonel.

One by one the men filed out. Jude stood waiting. He didn't know why he should be here, but Blackie had insisted. He shifted to the other foot, feeling green and out of place, his belongings in the sack beside him.

One by one the riders received their pay and filed out. Blackie tucked the money into his ragged pants pocket and came over as Bugger and Peanut went forward to be paid off.

"Smoke, Jude?" the twogun rider asked, extending the sack.

Jude took it, rolling. Now that he was here he hadn't quite made up his mind what the next move would be. Probably get a job in town, maybe at a livery or with one of the bone pickers. He was strong. He guessed that he could find something. He smoked and watched Peanut and Bugger file out. Then, to his astonishment, he heard his name called by the trail boss.

Shelby looked up over the still considerable pile of money in front of him. "I got you down for one hundred dollars," he said curtly. "Here it is."

Jude stared at him, started to demur. But the foreman already had dismissed the matter with a curt nod, making notations in the black tally book.

Blackie's voice said, "Take it, Jude. You earned it in a lot of ways. He wouldn't be paying you unless he figured you're worth it. Don't forget the five out of Grady's pay for the liquor," he added.

"I'd forgotten," grunted Shelby and handed over the money. He lifted his hard eyes to Jude's face. His voice, when he spoke again, was a little softer. "You can go back to Texas with us, if you want to, son. The outfit will be leaving in a few days, depending upon a number of things It's not an easy life on the T4. Thirty dollars a month for you, working from daylight until darkness, and sometimes longer than that. Hot in summer and so cold in the winter it'll cut you like a knife. Cattle as wild as antelopes and a damn sight meaner. But if you're fool enough to want to make a cow puncher, then by God, we'll make a cow puncher out of you."

It was, Jude thought, the nearest thing to being real human Shelby had ever displayed.

"I'll go," Jude said. "I'll try to earn my pay."

"You'll earn it. If you don't, I'll fire you damned quick."

"Come on, Jude," Blackie said. "If you're going to become a cowhand, you'll have to get outfitted. Let's go."

Jude picked up his belongings in the sack and they went out into the hallway and descended the steps. At the desk Blackie stopped. "I want a room for two," he told the clerk, and got it.

Jude put his belongings in a corner, locked the door, and the two of them descended into the street. "First place is a barber shop," Blackie told him. "Always keep up appearances, Jude. It pays. Take care of your equipment, and buy only the best."

He started to say something else and then Jude sensed the stiffening of Blackie's lean, whipcord body. Four tough looking men were approaching along the boardwalk led by a big dark-faced man. Blackie stopped and Jude saw that his hands lay close to the two heavy guns at his hips.

"Hello, Harrison," he said insolently. "How is the cow stealing business these days?"

The big man stopped abruptly, his eyes narrowing. The men back of him had stopped too. They looked like nesters to Jude; yet there was something in their appearance, the guns they wore, that proclaimed them men who could ride.

"I don't want any trouble with you, Blackie," Harrison said. "And you wouldn't try making it if you didn't know that Hickock is out of town for a few days."

"Sold your stolen herd yet?"

"I don't like that kind of talk," Harrison said harshly. "There are four of us here."

"You better go back and get some more help," sneered Blackie.

"I don't want any trouble," Harrison repeated.

"We lost Webbly back at Gramma Creek," Blackie said. "Somebody rattled a slicker and stampeded them again. Tolson got shot. If I ever get any proof of what I think I'm going to kill you. Come on Jude."

They passed warily, like strange dogs ready to snap. Blackie didn't look back. That much contempt he showed them.

"Who's he?" Jude asked.

"Harrison. Head of the NP outfit."

"Another ranch?"

THERE was a saloon's inviting doors in front of them and Blackie pushed in. They leaned against the bar, waiting for the busy man behind it to notice them.

"No," Blackie said. "NP means Nester Pool. You see, Jude, down in our country the nesters are coming in. Most people look upon the big cow outfits as a bunch of greedy range hogs pushing out the farmers. Nobody thinks anything of a nester stealing and butchering a steer now and then. All the big owners expect it, including Travers, who owns the T4. But this gang of nesters did things a little differently. They organized, with Harrison leading them. He claims to be a farmer. He's got a few acres of land down along the edge of the shinery. But from the time Harrison came in organized stealing began. The nesters banded together and began raiding us right and left. They'd even wait until it rained hard and then shoot a cow and let her float downstream, picking up her calf and rebranding. When they got enough they formed what they called the Nester Pool, the NP brand, and drove north. Fifteen hundred head, and everyone of them stolen from the big outfits. It's organized rustling and so far we haven't been able to do a thing about it."

The barkeep moved toward them, making perfunctory swipes at the polished surface with a foul smelling, wet bar rag. His eyes looked a question.

"Old Overalls," Blackie said.

The barkeep nodded, reached back of him, and placed two glasses and a quart bottle of old Overholt whiskey. He shot Jude a questioning glance.

"My son," Blackie said, interpreting it, and pouring. "My youngest of four sons. The others ran away from home when they were three and became pirates."

He placed the bottle beside Jude's glass, indicating that Jude could drink or not, just as he chose. Jude poured.

"You sure you can take it?" Blackie grinned.

"Yes."

"I forgot. Your old man makes stuff stronger than this. My mistake, Jude. Drink up, have another, and we'll go take care of some business. I have a lot of it."

They drank, had another, and went out. Blackie headed for a store. They went inside into a structure that was long and dark and whose shelves were loaded with almost every type of goods. Jude fingered the money in his pocket. They bought. They came out into the street again with their arms filled with packages. Next door was a gun shop. Blackie fumbled for the knob, found it below the packages in his arms, and they entered. They put the packages on the counter. A man in a canvas apron came forward.

"Gentlemen?" he inquired.

"Thank you very much," Blackie replied. "A man of my age and as ragged as I am seldom gets such compliments anymore. I'd ask you to tell me more but I haven't got time." he slid the heavy pistol at his right thigh from the sheath and deftly punched out the five loads from the cylinder, the big cartridges thudding to the counter. One chamber was empty; the one beneath the hammer. Jude also noticed that the front sight was filed off. Blackie said to the gunshop proprietor, "She seems just a little bit too easy on the trigger. I want you to touch up the notch just a bit and increase the pull by about a pound."

The man too kthe .45 single action in experienced hands and reached for a small weight beneath the counter. It had a hook on it. He cocked the gun and placed the hook inside the trigger guard, lifting it gently. The hammer fell. The man looked at Blackie and nodded.

"You're right, sir. A bit worn in the notches. I can take care if it. How about the other one?"

"The other one," Blackie said softly, "is going to stay right where it is until I get *that* one back. Sort of feel lost without them," he added by way of explanation.

"I understand, sir." I can take care of this in a few minutes, if you care to wait."

"We forgot the barbershop. We'll be back and pick up our packages."

THEY went out. There was a barbershop next door. Blackie was humming. Back at the creek he had taken but a small drink from the demijohn. In the bar he had poured big ones. Now he seemed to be in some kind of a devilish mood.

Jude somehow had the feeling that Blackie was spoiling for a fight. Guns or fists. He somehow realized in that moment that his "pardner" Blackie was a man of moods; an intelligent, educated man who was sneering at life and at himself.

They went in and sat down in chairs and the obsequious barbers got busy. The scissors went to work and locks of long hair fell to the floor. Jude indulged in the luxury of having his half fuzz, half whiskers scraped clean, his first shave in a barbershop. He looked over at Blackie in the next chair. What had emerged from beneath those long black, shaggy locks was one of the handsomest men Jude had ever laid eyes on.

"Just in from Texas, I take it?" Blackie's barber inquired.

"We're in from Texas, but don't you try to take it. Santa Ana tried it and look what happened to him."

The barber laughed politely.

"Bath?"

"Bath!" gasped out Blackie. "My dear man. I had a bath in every creek and river we crossed from Texas ,through Oklahoma, and even in Kansas. I've been *bath* . . .ed so much the skin is all rubbed off. I never want to see a bath again. I'm all wore out from baths."

Blackie was a devil. Jude was glad this mocking man was his friend. They got up out of the chairs. Blackie wouldn't let Jude pay. The two gunman, wearing one gun now, surveyed himself in the mirror.

"You like the job, sir?" inquired the barber.

Blackie said to his reflection in the mirror, "God, what a handsome son of a gun you are. Come on Jude," and they left. Laughter, slightly nervous, followed them. These Texans were a strange breed.

They went back to the gun shop next door. The smith had the Colt apart and was working. They went over to a rack of new repeaters, and Blackie took one down. He examined it critically.

".44-40. Try it, Jude. Not much for range but a good handy saddle gun. Ever shot a rifle?"

"A little," Jude admitted, working the new action. The lever flowed free under his strong, sure hands. This was a lot different from the old Sharps single shot.

"Put it on the counter. It's yours."

They went to the revolver rack next. Blackie slid out three or four guns, put them back, and finally turned with one in his hands. He looked at Jude. "If you're going back with us, pardner, you'd better take one of these with you. They come in handy sometimes. Unless I miss my guess we've got a first class range war on our hands. Harrison is too well organized and has got by too easy to stop his nester rustling. That is," he added, "unless I shoot the swine dead before we leave Abilene. I'll do it if I get a half chance."

Jude took the gun, a .44 caliber, realizing in that moment that Blackie was more than an educated man who laughed at life;

Blackie had the killer streak in him. While Jude examined the new gun with thrilled fingers his "pardner" was pulling down a new belt with loops for cartridges. The holster took his interest.

"Better for you to have a lighter gun. A .45 is all right. It was designed to knock a man down no matter where it hits him and it will do it. But you hit a man center with a lighter gun and—don't worry . . . he'll go down. Jude, if you ever get into a gunfight, aim for their bellies. You get a man in the belly and he'll hit dirt."

Blackie took the weapon from Jude's hands and shoved it experimentally into the new sheath. "Not a bad sheath," he said, "but you'll have to cut it away a bit to allow for the trigger guard. And get yourself a strap put on so's when you're riding it won't bounce out of the sheath."

Jude listened, all ears. He was getting advice from a man who knew his business. Blackie laid the new .44 Colt on the counter and waited until the gunsmith had returned his weapon. He tested the trigger action again, found it to his liking, and handed over the other gun. This one was all right. He slipped it into the lefthand sheath and picked up the new weapon.

"File off the front sight," he ordered. "If Jude ever gets into a lead throwing fracas I don't want him going down because his gun snagged in the holster. Savvy?"

"Yessir, I certainly do."

THEY returned to their hotel room loaded down with purchases. Jude dumped his on the bed. He knew that a new life was beginning for him. The old had been put behind. He was thrilled and yet a little sad. He followed Blackie's example and began stripping off his clothes.

"Throw those damned overalls away," the other said. "You're a cow puncher now, Jude. You won't need them anymore. We'll have to get you a good saddle too, but that can wait. Now for a good hot bath."

They took one in the hotel's bathroom, scrubbing themselves almost furiously. Blackie was singing in the bathtub, covered with lather.

Oh, Myrtle got drunk at the dance,
Oh, Myrtle got drunk at the dance,
She went to Laredo to get a new hair-do,
But Myrtle got drunk at the dance . . .
ance . . . ance."

"I never heard that song before," Jude said, watching the smooth, rippling of his friend's muscles. He was unaware of his own magnificent body.

"Neither did anybody else. I made it up myself. Jude, we're going to tear up this town tonight. I got a girl here. She was a singer in Kansas City shows but she's here now. I wrote her from the ranch and told her we were on our way with the herd. She said she'd be here. Maybe she's got a friend. Or maybe you are not interested."

Blackie leaned back in the tub and howled.

"Jude, you're all right. Yee-hoo! I'm going to kill a man tonight and then make love to the prettiest girl in Abilene. Come in—get out of that other tub. We're going places."

They got out of the tub and, because Blackie was almost drunk, they strolled down the hallway in the nude. The new clothes felt good and Jude experienced a strange new thrill as he pulled on the new high heeled boots: his first pair.

Blackie slung his guns around his hips. Jude let his new weapon lay. He reached into the now lightened gunnysack and brought out the coiled blacksnake whip. Another object touched his fingers and he brought it out too. The picture of his mother. Blackie bent over his shoulder.

"Your mother, Jude? She doesn't look like a farmer's wife."

"She was a school teacher," Jude said.

"So that's where you get the un-farmer way of talking. I noticed it from the first. I have a little education myself. What's the idea of the bull whip?"

"Got to get some new poppers for it while I'm here," Jude said, replacing the picture in the gunnysack. "I'll take it along."

He coiled the whip over his shoulder, the full twenty foot length of it.

They went out into the late evening sun. It would soon be dark.

"Wonder where the rest of the boys are?" Jude asked.

Blackie said, "Nute's probably hunting up the boss. He went to Chicago, him and his wife, to meet their daughter, and then said they'd try to get here by the time we rolled in with the herd. Come on, I'm hungry. Bet you Pokey is dead drunk already. Let's get another drink."

CHAPTER IX

THEY went into a bar and had another drink. Blackie wasn't drunk but he was "high" and feeling his oats after the long, dry (whiskey dry) trip northward. He was feeling the effects of the liquor. His mood was expansive. The haircut and the new clothes had (again) changed his mood. A man of changing moods; many strange moods. Jude drank, the bull whip still coiled over his right shoulder. Out in the street the sounds played a symphony: booted heels clumping along the boardwalks; bull whackers' whips snapping; riders jogging through the dirt of the streets that, after the rains, was neither dry nor wet. Now and then a high cowboy yell cut the air and, once, Jude heard pistol shots. Hickok was out of town and they were letting off steam. Not that it mattered. Hickock was a bad man in a gunfight, but he was vastly overrated. His reputation was riding high above his actual exploits. Reports were drifting in that that fight in the stage line station wasn't according to what Wild Bill had reported. He hadn't killed nine men with rifle and pistol and knife. One of them, a mere kid, had escaped, and his story of what actually had taken place was quite a bit different from Hickok's.

Blackie drank and looked at Jude.

"Jude, you sure can handle this stuff. I know . . . your old man runs a corn still. You're taking me drink for drink and it's showing no effect on you. Let's have another before we eat. This is my night to howl and I'm busting this town wide open."

Jude drank with him. The bar was fully sixty feet long. It was lined. Riders from everywhere; bull whackers; buffalo hunters now turned bone pickers. Four men came in. It had to be Harrison and his three followers. The big man bellied up to the bar, half shoving men aside. He wore two guns. A "nester" who wore two guns.

Blackie said, "Wait a minute, Jude," and made his way along the bar. He disappeared toward the big outhouse outside and soon came back. Harrison and his men had had their drinks. A poker game had started—apparently a big one—for men had drifted away from the bar and were gathered in a circle about it. Cattlemen playing for big stakes that excluded any puncher. The bar was half bare now.

Blackie came back. He hadn't come to Jude's side. He stopped twenty feet further along, leaving Harrison and his three dog tails between him and Jude.

"I got a bad taste in my mouth," Blackie's voice came, distinctly and insultingly. "Give me an Overalls to cut it, barkeep."

He was leaning with his left elbow on the bar. He wasn't looking at the bartender. He was looking at Harrison.

"We lost two hundred head at Gramma Creek," he grinned at the bigger man. He was bedevilling him. Sneering at him. Jude felt it and he tensed. Harrison and his three men were rigid, waiting. "Stampede. Webbly got killed and Tolson got shot. I've been up and down the street and I haven't seen but four of your boys. Maybe they're across the tracks in the bawdy houses—where they belong—, and maybe it's just a co-incidence that they're not in town."

Grady came in. He had bought himself a new outfit. He was half drunk. He leaned up beside Jude at the bar.

"I'll buy you a drink before I whip the hell out of you, farmer," he said, his eyes on Jude's new wide brimmed hat, blue flannel shirt, trousers and the boots.

"Get out of my way," Jude said, his eyes on Harrisons' right hand.

The bartender came over, giving Grady the expectant look that bartenders give to a new customer. "Whiskey, single," Grady grunted. "This damned farmer is too good to drink with me because he's a pal of the T4 outfits' two gunmen."

"Get out of my way," Jude repeated.

Blackie was saying, "Those two hundred head will turn up. I hope they do."

He picked up his drink to down it and in that instant Harrison drew his right hand pistol. It came out fast. But Jude had somehow expected it and already had flicked the coils of the bull whip off his shoulder, laying them out on the floor in a twenty foot length of plaited leather. Harrison's hand was half up out of the sheath, holding the gun, when the popper sang out. Blackie's drink was coming down from his lips.

Harrison let out a yell of pain and a gun clattered to the floor. He grabbed his right hand, a red welt appearing as if by magic across the knuckles. Blackie had acted automatically. In a flash his two pistols were out covering the others.

"You dogs," he said, grinning. "You yellow dogs."

"Here . . . here!" broke in the sweating bartender. "Cut it out, you Texans. Do your fighting outside."

Nute Shelby's tall figure broke through the swinging doorway. The poker game had ceased. All eyes were riveted upon the men at the bar, Blackie with the two guns at his hips gradually coming up into firing line. Jude with the length of blacksnake again uncoiled on the floor back of him. He was scared and so was Grady.

"Cut it, Blackie," the trail boss's voice said. He moved forward. "Get out of here."

"I'll get out when I'm damned good and ready," Blackie replied, ignoring the foreman. Then he calmly shoved his guns into their sheaths. "There were four of you this afternoon. There still are. Now throw 'em."

Two men wearing town marshal's badges converged, shouldering their way between the two groups. "All right, Texans. No fighting. Do it when you get back home. Not here in Abilene or we'll jail the whole bunch of you."

"There won't be any fighting," Shelby's voice said calmly. "They're my men and I give the orders. Blackie, you and Jude get out of here. Harrison, you stand pat until they leave. Get out, I said."

Jude was coiling the blacksnake. It was over. Grady stood with drink half poised. Jude and Blackie went out.

"I'd have shot it out with the four of them," the other said.

"I know you would have."

"Thanks for the play, Jude. That dog would have shot me without an even break. You're pretty handy with that bull whip. I'm glad you brought it along. Let's go eat."

JUDE was still filled with a strange kind of keyed up excitement, and he wondered how this handsome man beside him could apparently dismiss such a matter with a laugh. They went down the street. They ate in a cafe and Jude left the whip at a saddle shop to have it fitted with a new popper and some spares, promising to return the next day. He still had to buy a tarp bedroll and a saddle.

They walked down the street, full and contended, and with Jude feeling a bit awkward in his new boots. They didn't hurt; he simply wasn't used to the high heels. He felt a foot taller.

"Let's go across the tracks," his older companion said. "I told you I've got business."

They went across the tracks. Here the buildings were about the same, with a half curving street playing thoroughfare for the saloons, gambling dives, and bawdy houses. On one corner stood a huge place of two stories, the false fronts above it giving the appearance of three stories, its porches reaching out over the boardwalks almost to the hitching racks. Music was lapping out through the corner swinging doors playing hostage to a stream of men coming and going. A big place. One of the biggest in town.

"That's the Prairie Dove," Blackie said. "Bartender told me. And she's singing there, he said."

"I've seen it," Jude said. "I've never been in it."

"Were going in now."

They crossed the street and came upon the board sidewalk and pushed inside into a mass of bright lights, gaming tables, and a bar at least one hundred feet long. It was lined and the gaming tables, at the opposite side of the room, were crowded. At the far end was a stage with a five piece orchestra playing in a pit. Two men in derby hats were dancing, their checkered suits showing up garishly against the raiment of the crowd. Those at the gaming tables were paying no attention. Those drinking at the tables were. Jude followed Blackie along the length of the bar and took position alongside him against the wall. Blackie's eyes were not upon the performers. Their glittering depths were searching the crowd.

"No NP men here," he finally grunted. "I'd bet a hundred dollars of the wages I've got that the rest of them are out with that two hundred head we lost."

He shifted his attention to the stage, relaxing a little. Six girls came out, dancing a sort of can-can while a middle aged woman in a flowery dress sang a heartrending ballad.

"That barkeep said she'd be here," Blackie said.

When the number ended a man with a spit curl in his parted hair and sporting a long black mustache came out on the stage.

"La-dees an' Gennlmn," he bawled

above the buzzing uproar. "Our chief attraction at the Prairie Dove, di-rect here from the east, the young su-prano of superior qualities, your favorite of the prairies, Miss Edwina Cochran."

The applause, partly polite, drowned out the click at the gaming tables. Gamblers were men who concentrated. They had no time for singers.

"Here she comes," Blackie said in an aside to Jude.

She came out, golden haired and in a long flowing dress, with enough shoulders bared to be considered daring. She made graceful, sweeping bows and stepped to the front edge of the stage just above the orchestra. She began to sing; just about the prettiest thing Jude had ever seen.

She clasped her hands in front of her. She held them out beseechingly. She folded them, clasped, over a left shoulder. She sang three songs. She retired with more graceful bows.

"Come on, Jude," Blackie said, moving from the wall.

"Maybe I'd better stay here," Jude said, half embarrassed. "You can come on back to the hotel room when you're ready."

Blackie's devil black eyes were dancing. "God, how naive you are, Jude," he laughed. "I'm not coming back to the hotel tonight. Neither are you. Come on."

They pushed their way in among the tables and made for a curtained doorway at the left side of the stage with three steps leading up. Somebody in the crowd laughed loudly. They were in the wings now and a man in a derby hat saw them. He bustled forward authoritatively.

"Here . . . you cow punchers," he snapped out brusquely. "You're always trying to come backstage and annoy these girls. Get out of here and wait till they dress and come down. Then if they want to drink with you, that's their business. But nobody allowed back stage."

Blackie's strong hands reached out, gripping the edge of the cast-iron hat. He pulled down hard. The owner's eyes and part of his face disappeared into the hard crown. Blackie's shove sent him reeling.

HE WALKED on through, into a flurry of girls and acrobats and comedians. Two belligerent stage hands came forward, saw the two guns, and didn't come all the way.

"Who you lookin' for, cow punch?" one asked.

"I'm not a cow punch," Blackie sneered. "I'm a gentleman rider of the open ranges of Texas and this is my gentleman friend. Where's Edwina?"

"Miss Cochran? It's against the rules—"

"I know. I drink whiskey and it's against the rules. I eat beef and it's against the rules. Now I come in to see Edwina and it's against the rules. Where is she?"

"It's against the rules—"

Blackie said casually to Jude, "I'll toss you to see who hits him. Five gets you five that I can knock him further than you can Jude."

Jude Gordon didn't answer. He was looking at one of the stage hands, who was edging forward. The man bore a striking resemblence to his father. He was about the same age—around forty-seven or eight, he was big shouldered and raw boned, he had pepper shot whiskers, and his breath smelled of raw whiskey.

And he said about the same thing that Jude's father had said to Blackie. "I said rules, cow punch. And if you think that because you're wearing two pistols you can come back here—you and that little squirt with you—"

That final ephithet might have had something to do with it. Jude remembered all those years when his father, in drunken rages, had referred to him as being the son of some other man. It exploded something inside his brain. He stepped forward and let go with all that was back of his wiry, powerful young body. He felt pain go through his knuckles as the man went down five feet away, rolled over on his face, and lay still. He stood there rubbing his hand while a girl screamed and Blackie began to chuckle. He reached into his pocket, hoisted one of the guns up, and brought out five silver dollars.

"You win, Jude. I couldn't have knocked him that far—*Honey!*"

It was the singer. She had come up a short flight of steps that led down below the stage and now stood there, all golden in the lights, and making Jude's heart do queer things. She was about twenty, he guessed, and never had he laid eyes on such a beautiful creature.

She gave a cry and ran forward into Blackie's arms. Jude looked at the man on the floor and at the girl in Blackie's arms and suddenly for some strange reason, felt embarrassed again. This was all new to him and he felt like a country bumpkin . . . which was exactly what he was. He could handle a team, snap aff a rattlesnake's head with a bullwhip, hit a man hard enough to knock him five feet. But he still felt embarrassed.

Blackie still had Edwina Cochran in his arms and they were murmuring something. Jude went over to where the fallen man lay. He was mumbling and trying to sit up, rubbing his jaw.

"I'm sure sorry," Jude said. "I didn't intend to but you called me a name . . ." He was helping the other to his feet. The man swayed, still rubbing his jaw.

"I shoulda known better," he said. "I did it once before to a cowpuncher and he hit me over the head with a gun barrel. God, son, if you can hit that hard with your fist I'm glad you're not packing a gun. It's all right. Just so many of these trail drive punchers coming back here after these girls. You want a drink?"

"I've had plenty, much obliged," Jude replied. "No more tonight. I got to be getting back to the hotel."

"Hotel," came Blackie's scoffing voice, and Jude turned. Blackie stood there, his arm around the singer's waist. "Come here, Jude, and meet the sweetest little girl on the prairie."

Jude went over, removing his hat as his mother had taught him to do. He stood there in front of the singer, eighteen years old, five feet ten in height plus the new boot heels, unaware of his own young strength and good looks.

"Hello, Jude," Edwina greeted, extending a slim hand. "You're all right. Say . . . you can take care of yourself. Blackie, he's handsome! Far more than you. You going to stay here in Abilene, Jude?"

"Cut it out," Blackie's voice said. "Jude's my partner, not my rival. Find him another girl."

"I don't want a girl," Jude said, feeling his face come aflame.

"Come on down to the dressing room," Edwina said, leading the way down the steps. "It's beneath the stage. Follow me."

THEY went down. They pushed through more curtains into a kind of hallway that must have led to someplace in the back alley, and then went into a small room to one side. It was a woman's room. A dressing table with large mirrors, a big closet, doorless, for hanging costumes, a couch and chairs, and over it all the fragrance of perfume and powder.

Blackie sat down on the couch and tossed his hat at a chair across the room. The hat missed its mark and Blackie stretched out, making himself quuite at home. "Honey, you're beautiful," he said.

CHAPTER X

EDWINA sat down at the dressing table. Blackie relaxed on the couch. Jude sat stiffly on the edge of his chair, feeling ill at ease. In the hallway outside the dressing room door came the sounds of footsteps and laughter; the rest of the troop descending, a little relieved that the fracas backstage hadn't turned into anything serious. You could feel it in their laughter.

"When did you get in, Blackie?" the singer asked. Perhaps she was aware of Jude's fascinated eyes on her bare shoulders. He could see her reflection in the mirror and once, through the glass, her eyes met his.

"Today, of course, honey. You don't think I'd waste any time looking you up."

"How long will you be here?"

Blackie stifled a yawn, stretching his well muscled body out further on the couch. He felt at home, in command of the situation; he was. "How long? You ought to meet Mike Kessler who talks of stars and time in space. How long? How long is how long measured in Mike's ideas of time? Such a question!"

She prettied, turning to look first at him and then at Jude. She seemed to be more interested in Jude. At least her glance lingered longer.

"I just asked you. Perhaps you could put it in days."

"Again a matter of time and infinite space. We had problems coming up the trail, sweet. Two hundred problems on four hoofs that disappeared. I have a hunch these problems will crop up again. Who knows?"

She turned away, to the right and her back to Blackie, facing Jude. "I met him in Kansas City," she explained. "He always talks this way. In riddles. That's what comes from having too much education. I ask him a simple question and he answers in riddles. How long will you . . . I mean, Jude, how long will *he* be here in town."

"I don't know," Jude confessed, glad of an opportunity to relieve his awkward silence. He had been playing with the stiff brim of his new Stetson hat. "From what I heard the boys say, about a week."

He was wondering how he could make a graceful bow out and get back to the hotel. Edwina disturbed him in a way that the farm girl plowing the field had never disturbed him, and he didn't like it. She was Blackie's girl and Jude knew that he had no business thinking anything different.

"That's more like it," Edwina said. "He's different from you, Blackie. He always gets to the point."

"Never mind the point, sweet. We've got things to do. He's coming along. But three's a crowd. Four is very distinctively *not* a crowd. Savvy?"

She got up and went to the door, opened it, and disappeared into the hallway. Jude felt his stomach constrict. He wanted to get back to the hotel. He wished at that moment that he was out of there and back on the farm with his father. Blackie winked.

"Just stick around, Jude," he said.

"I oughta go look up Tolson," Jude said. "he's shot through the hip and maybe . . ."

Edwina came back through the doorway. With her was a dark young girl, very pretty, about Jude's age. She still wore her stage costume.

"This is Angelica," she said to them both. "She rooms with me upstairs," and then finished the introductions.

"Hiya," Angelica said.

Blackie had raised upon one elbow. Jude wasn't blushing but something in his mien appeared to strike the twogun rider as being funny. He went off into laughter. "Come on, let's get out of here," he hooted.

Jude got up form the chair where he had been sitting. That constriction had hit his stomach again. "I guess I ought to get out and go back down town," he said. "I . . . sorta promised to look up Tolson," he finished weakly.

It wasn't fear. It wasn't timidness . . . now. It was the picture of his mother in his gunnysack. Maybe it wouldn't last too long. He was a "grown man" now and a man had to live his own life. And he was on his own. He rose. So did Angelica.

She was just a little bit indignant. After all, she was the one who was supposed to go on and sing in case Edwina should be indisposed. She was beautiful and she knew it. She had to fight off the crude attentions of one drunk trail driver cow puncher after another, and none of them ever had received any favors. And when she could be induced to be nice to a friend of Edwina's, and this lithe, good looking young cowboy finally came along . . .

The knock, hard, short rapping, and professional, came on the door. Jude was glad of the opportunity to move . . . anything to get away from Angelica's lovely but accusing eyes. He opened it.

It was the stagehand Jude had knocked down. He grinned a little and said, "Hello, cowpunch. Somebody here." Nute Shelby pushed through the doorway. He was followed by Mike Kessler, the limping Joe, and Peanut, the day wrangler. Peanut stood rigidly, and in this moment he didn't look like a horse wrangler. There was dignity and a cool aloofness in the way in which he slid his still square shoulders up against the wall beside the doorway. He was an officer now.

They made an incongruous group. Edwina, throwing questioning looks from one face to the other; Angelica, feeling half superior to them all, but still with that warm feeling within her when she looked at Jude, he was that handsome; Blackie raising up on an elbow, again, a question in his black eyes; at these cowmen, bursting into the dressing room of a singer below the raised stage of an Abilene bar and gambling place.

And Mike . . .

"Ahhh . . ." he said, "perfume. Bees and flowers. Lovely ladies. Thee call of thee opposite sex. Life, thou has did me wrong, thou has did. Sweet perfume. Methinks I like it. Ahhh . . ."

BLACKIE was up off the couch now. He was looking at the trail boss. "Let's have it Nute. How'd you find us here?"

"Made the rounds of the bars. Asked questions," was the curt reply. "Barkeep said a man with two guns and a younker came up here. We barged through. We're here."

"All right, you're here. Now what?"

"Tolson is dead. He bought himself some crutches when he got in town. I traced him from one bar to another. He was limping around and doing all right, but I wanted to be sure. Then he started across the tracks. Somebody got him there. In the back. Maybe they were afraid there'd be an inquiry when we got in town and wanted to keep him from being a witness. All I know is that his body is down at the undertaking parlor. Come on."

He went out. The others followed, Jude and Blackie the last. Angelica's eyes met Jude's.

"Yew comin' back?" she asked archly. "I got to go down now and mingle with the customers but I wish yew'd come back."

"No," Jude said.

"Yes," Blackie said, shoving him through the door in a goood natured manner. He'll be back with me."

Mike tucked Angelica beneath the chin. "If there's anymore like you around, Honey, save me about a half dozen."

"Yew sure that'll be enough, you smart cowboy?"

"For awhile. A dozen later."

Nute Shelby's hard voice came down the hallway. "Come on, men."

They followed down the hallway, Edwina with Blackie. "Angelica and me will have to do a couple of more turns on the stage and then we'll be through. We'll wait for you."

They filed up the steps, across the now deserted stage with its drawn curtain, and down through the curtained doorway again. Somebody said, laughingly, "These trail herd Texans don't waste any time, do they?"

The group of them stopped, bunched up, at the bar. Peanut said, "I've got to get thet Buggah outa jail."

"What did the town marshals say?" Blackie asked the trail boss, as they ordered

"About Tolson? About what Hickock would have said if he was in town. Another trail herd puncher killed from another Texas trail herd crew. They just shrugged. I guess I can't blame 'em. They're trouble stoppers, not detectives."

They drank and went out, led by Shelby. They clumped down the boardwalk. Their boots echoed hollowly in the night. The fresh plains air felt good to Jude's face. He realized only then how hot and flushed it had been, Angelica . . .

He had never had too many ideas about life and love. He remembered the farmer girl and some instinct had told him that even though loneliness and hunger out there was extremely trying it still wasn't an excuse to find antidote; it still wasn't right. But this was a raw, hard life and he no longer was a boy. He had saved Blackie's life with the bull whip and he was heading south to what he knew were lonely ranges where there were no women. And, anyhow, he didn't ever intend to get married. Just work hard and . . .

Angelica . . . He wanted to go back and yet he didn't. He was making excuses.

"What now?" Blackie asked Nute Shelby.

"Spread out and make the rounds of all the saloons. Drift in and see if you can see any NP punchers. Ask questions as to when they came in. They're drinking and talking. Some might boast and let a few words slip out."

"I've only seen five or six so far," Peanut's voice cut in. "Wheah you think the othuhs are?"

Nobody answered. They were cutting on down past more saloons now.

"The old man get in yet?" Blackie asked.

He and Nute were leading the others. "Yes," curtly, "on the late train. They're put up at the hotel."

He named it. It was the same hotel where Jude and Blackie had their room.

"The kid get in with them?"

"Yes. They got some fool idea about going home with us. Sounds foolish to me, but he's the boss. Says he feels a lot more at home in a wagon or on horseback than on a damned stage."

NUTE then stopped. The others in the little group stopped too. The trail boss said, "You're about all that's left sober out of the bunch. The others are over in the bawdy houses. Grady's around town somewhere. If you run into him tell him what to do. Meet me at the hotel in one hour and we'll compare notes."

"All right." Blackie speaking. "What did the old man say about that two hundred head?"

"Nothing. Got to expect things like that on a drive. We picked up a few strays on the way up. I insisted on an actual count. Twenty-eight hundred and forty-one head. They'll rebrand before shipping. These buyers ain't too particular as long as they can get beef. Mike, you take this first place and then spread out along the street. The rest of you the same. Meet me in an hour. I'm going to the hotel and wait."

Mike was slim and blonde and about twenty-six. He stood beside Jude and eyed the inviting doors of the saloon. "And to think," he murmured, "that I might have become a scholar. But now I've got to go into a place where that vile stuff known as rotgut, red-eye, alcohol, and plain panther piss is being sold to poor innocent cow punchers. Tsk . . . tsk . . . tsk! Coming in for a drink, Jude?"

"I'll help you work the street," Jude answered.

They disintegrated. Jude went in with Mike, who promptly headed for the bar. Jude left him there. He worked in and out of one saloon after another and finally found himself back on the main street. There was a kind of lean-to dive built alongside of a much larger building and Jude went toward it. He didn't go in. He headed for a side window. He knew none of the NP outfit by sight, except the four who had been on the street that afternoon, but he cut around to the side and looked in.

At the bar, drinking with Harrison, was Grady.

Jude went in. He worked his way along until he came to a spot some ten feet away. He ordered a drink, hoping to listen. But the buck-toothed puncher had spotted him. He sneered and turned slowly. A painted woman, all of thirty-five, came up and slid a familiar arm around Grady's waist.

"Hello, farmer," Grady sneered again, his arm tightening around her.

Jude said nothing.

"He's a nester that hooked himself onto the outfit to get a few square meals," Grady explained in a loud voice. "A cheap, whiskey selling farmer."

Harrison had turned slowly. His right hand was swollen and had a light bandage around it. There was nothing wrong with the *left* one dropping down to his left hip in a casual sort of way.

"The bull whip kid, eh?" he grunted. "You made a mistake coming in here, younker. The worst mistake you ever made."

"I'm going to beat his head off," Grady sneered, pushing himself away from the painted harridan who clug to him.

She clung the harder. "Aw, now, Texas," she protested. "You don't want to do any fightin'. We got lots of things to do."

"We'll do 'em later,' Grady said.

Harrison's hard voice cut in. "Hold it, Grady. I'll take care of this."

Jude had picked up his drink served by a wooden faced bartender. He moved forward toward them. He was unarmed and he knew what was coming. And for some strange reason he felt no fear. It might have been the drinks . . .

He stopped three feet from Grady. Men were not paying too much attention. They had noticed and gone back to their talking. It was a hard, brutal, tough place.

Harrison said, "Too bad you haven't got your bull whip with you, kid. This hand of mine won't be much good for another couple of weeks. And men don't do that kind of thing to Jim Harrison. It's out for you."

Then a voice came softly from back of them; a voice that Jude knew all too well. Blackie!

"Not yet, Harrison."

HARRISON turned and froze. Grady's mouth was open in fear and stupidy. His slow brain was trying to absorb the new turn of events. "You rat," Blackie said. "I don't mind a man stealing a few cows now and then. I'd do it myself if things shaped my way. But a man don't turn coyote on his *outfit*. He sticks by them. Jude, he was going to take you. He can still do it, if you want. But Harrison is not going to use that one good hand of his. It's up to you."

Jude pushed his farm hardened young body away from the bar. "I think I got a good hunch who rattled that slicker and maybe shot Tolson that night. Maybe finishing up the job tonight. I'll bet that Shelby won't have you on the ranch anymore."

Then he lunged.

CHAPTER XI

THEY came out into the street ten minutes later. Blackie paused and looked back. He was still laughing. Grady was down on the floor, being pulled up by the harridan, and Jim Harrison, head of the Nester Pool of cattle rustlers, had not moved. Jude wiped at the blood at his nose again, using a sleeve of the new shirt, and again Blackie's strange, uncomprehending laugh filled the darkness.

It had been quite a fight.

"By God, Jude, you surprise me more and more all the time," the older man said, a little more seriously. "Grady outweighs you by a good twenty pounds. He's all muscle and no brain and yet you took him. He knocked you down twice but you kept coming back for more, quick as a cat. If you could learn to throw a gun as naturally as you use your fists, you'd be a young holy terror."

"I'll make out all right," Jude said. "He said he was going to lick me. I gave him his chance."

"He had his chance all right. So did Harrison. You notice how *he* stood fast and didn't make a move. I was hoping differently. He knew I was hoping differently. I was aching for him to make a move. Someday I'm going to kill that moron and I wanted it tonight, but he wouldn't make a play. Come on, let's go across the street to the hotel. Nute'll be waiting."

They went across, their boots plodding into the dirt. Jude swerved aside as a buggy drawn by a span of bays trotted past. The lobby was inviting and they went in. None of the others of the outfit had yet arrived. But there were three people with the trail boss.

Jude didn't have to look at the short, wiry man, the buxom woman sitting on the cowhide lounge beside him, and the impatiently pacing young woman in fashionable clothes to know that this was the T4 owner and his family.

"So that's what she look like?" came Blackie's murmured voice in Jude's ear. "She'd just left for the east when I joined the outfit."

"She's sure pretty," Jude observed.

"Yeah, and she sure knows it, too. But I want that. Im going to have it."

Jude threw a side glance at his companion. There was something hard in Blackie's face; something that was almost brutal. Jude thought of Edwina the singer and said nothing as they went over to the others.

Harry Travers was in his late forties, his leather like face showing the years he'd spent against the sun and under the stars. He'd probably fought in the Civil War too, Jude thought; like Peanut. He'd married his wife when she was seventeen. She hadn't been buxom then. She was now, and still in her thirties.

Introductions came first, Nute Shelby doing the honors. Nell Travers acknowledged them with a brief extension of a hand and a briefer nod, and resumed her restless pacing, something in her mein saying that she was forgetting her heredity and remembering her environment of the past year or so. She acted in a too casual manner that was almost indifferent, though she did glance at Jude's left eye, which persisted in streaming water.

Grady had landed a good one there during the fight. The skin area around the eye probably would discolor for a week or so.

"Anything to report?" grunted the foreman.

"Nothing on Tolson or the NP men," Blackie said, and then gave details of the fight across the street. "Grady was right there, drinking with Harrison, friendly as could be. Harrison's hand was bandaged where Jude cut it with the bull whip when he tried to draw on me, but there wasn't anything wrong with the other one. He wouldn't draw. It was the second chance today."

"You'd better put those guns away before you end up in trouble," Travers cut in in a voice that was strangely soft, part drawl.

"Not while Harrison is packing his. That all, Nute?"

"That's all."

Blackie turned to Jude, who somehow had the idea that part of Blackie's conversation had been for the benefit of Nell Travers. She had picked up interest enough to stop her impatient pacing.

"In that case, I reckon we'll be going," the twogun rider said. "Miss Travers, glad to have met you. See you later, boss."

Jude hesitated. "I think I'll go upstairs and—" he began, but Blackie's hand clasped him around the back of the neck and gave him a good natured shove.

"You're going upstairs, all right," came a soft laugh in Jude's ear as they headed toward the street again. "But not here."

And in that moment Jude realized that

Blackie had a strange hold over him. He didn't understand why. Perhaps it was because this devilish man had befriended him; perhaps because of the man's fearlessness, the two guns he wore. Jude went with him.

"Only one thing puzzles me, Blackie," Jude said as they headed back toward the Prairie Dove. "You got education. I'll bet you've got more than my mother gave me. So I can't figure you punching cows for thirty dollars a month. It just doesn't add up.'

"It adds up plenty, pardner. A man has to get the lay of the land before he starts operating. I got it. I've got big plans . . . and they don't include busting my insides out topping frisky bronks on cold mornings. You stick with me and you'll be rich."

THEY entered the Prairie Dove again. It was still early. Jude saw Edwina fencing off laughingly the clumsy caresses of a half drunk cow puncher, and some kind of a sharp jealousy shot through him. Blackie said, "Come on," and headed for a roulette table. A few desultory players were betting but there was little interest. They bellied up and Blackie reached for his money.

"Got those two silver dollars left, Jude?" he asked, grinning.

Jude brought them out.

"Then get on me. I'm steaming. We're going to roll."

He began to play the red and black and Jude, betting a dollar at a time began to collect his winnings. Presently Blackie began to plunge. Jude followed him, taking in nine to one winnings. Sometimes they lost but usually they won. Blackie was plunging more. Once he bet ten dollars on the number thirteen and hit it on the nose. He looked sideways at Jude and grinned.

"You should have rode with me, Jude. I told you I can't lose."

They played on, and presently the dealer began to look worried. Jude was three hundred and forty dollars to the good and Blackie must have had close to eighteen hundred. They were using chips now. Five dollar chips. The dealer glanced over his shoulder as the two cow punchers raked in another killing. Jude saw his nod in signal to a hard-faced man who looked more like a salesman than a gambler.The man came threading through, shouldering his way past players.

"I'll take over," he announced.

Blackie paused, leaning over a pile of chips he was busy stacking. "Yeah?" he said, his eyes narrowing.

"What's wrong with the other dealer?" Jude asked.

The new man shrugged. He was hard-faced, hard-eyed, and there was a bulge in the right sleeve of his white shirt. A hidden derringer.

"Dealers have to be relieved," he said curtly. "One hour on, thirty minutes off to sit down."

"We haven't been playing an hour."

"House rules, cowboy. Take it or leave it."

"I'm taking it," Blackie said.

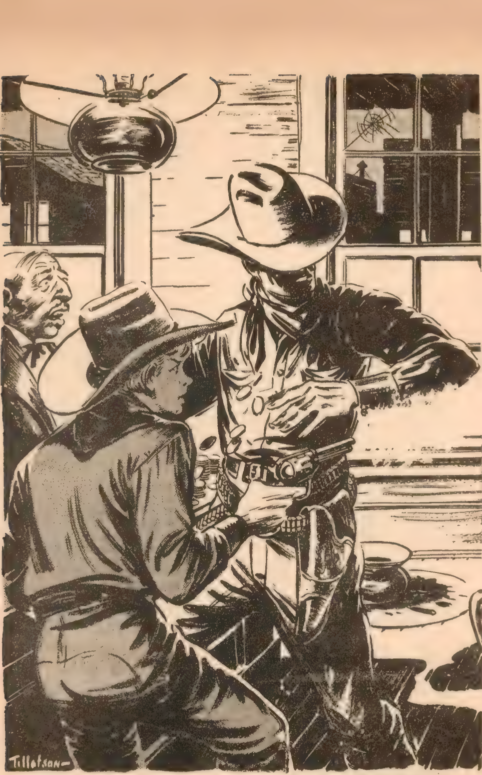
The dealer spun the wheel and then spun the ball in its groove, in the opposite direction. Blackie had put one hundred dollars on the black, Jude, something warning him, didn't bet. The dealer had his hands on the table now, fingers beneath the edge. The white ball dropped into the red. Blackie bet on the black once more and once more it was red. One hundred dollars a throw. Four more players were with them, betting from one to five dollars. Jude wasn't long in realizing that it now was a game between the dealer and Blackie. He left his chips lay where they were stacked.

Then Blackie made a four hundred dollar bet on the red. The dealer leaned forward over the table, hands resting on the edge of it, fingers out of sight below.

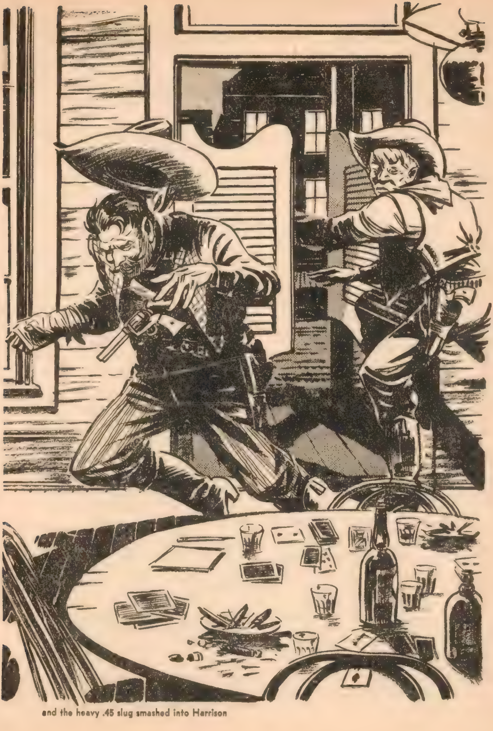
Right at that moment two things happened almost simultaneously. Blackie did a dive to the floor and looked beneath the table; and the dealer jerked back his right hand, slapping a .41 derringer into the palm.

Blackie had merely gone down on one knee and Jude's yell of warning caught him.

A gun roared. It roared twice more. Blackie, half up across the table, held the smoking .45 in his right hand as the crooked dealer went down on his back, shot three times through the chest. Bedlam broke loose. Men yelled and dived for cover. Others stood frozen, too startled to move. Blackie straightened and, still gripping the pistol in his right hand, went around back of the table as the two marshals came plowing their way through the



Blackie's left-hand gun roared in Jude's hand—



and the heavy .45 slug smashed into Harrison crowd.

Blackie stood astraddle of the dead dealer's body. His other gun was out now. His black eyes were blazing as he faced the two lawmen.

"Hand over those guns, cow punch," ordered one of the marshals, advancing. "You can't get away with that in here. This is Abilene."

"This is Texas, mister. I can get away with it. He drew on me with a sleeve gun. It's here on the floor. And come around here and take a look at these fancy little gadgets under the edge of this table. Nice bunch of skunks you've got here."

ONE of the other players had gone down beneath the table. He came up, fighting to get to his feet in the close packed crowd. "Men," he called out loudly, "this wheel's crooked.I call on you to witness it. They played the law of averages until these cowmen began to win. Then they slipped in a crooked dealer to get back their lost cash. This finishes the Prairie Dove. It's a crooked layout!"

The marshals, a little less belligerent now, came gingerly forward. They went beneath the table and looked. They came up. They looked at the dead man on the floor, saw the derringer, and heard the rumbling mutter of the crowd. The rest of the gaming tables were deserted. One of the marshals looked at Blackie.

"All right, cow punch. Self defense. I wish Hickock was here."

Blackie said, "Pick up your chips, Jude, and let's cash 'em in. I'm taking a few hundred from this dealer's rack to make up for those last bets. Come on."

They shouldered through a path respectfully opened for them and went across to the wall opposite the bar. Back of a wire cage, a shotgun guard in a high chair above him, was a slender man wearing a green eyeshade and black "garters" on his shirt sleeves above the elbows.

Blackie shoved his hat over the counter, turning it upside down. A stream of chips cascaded out. One rolled off the counter and struck the floor. Blackie's black hair gleamed in the yellow glow of the wall bracket lamps and his black eyes were still brighter.

"Pay off," he ordered.

The dealer reached out with slender fingers and they did magic to the chips, separating them into various colored piles. He riffled the stacks expertly, said, "eighteen hundred and fifty," and reached below the counter. Blackie said, "nineteen hundred and fifty, you crooked son of a gun," and reached through to grasp the dealer's wrist. He twisted it hard; brutally.

Jude had laid his own small pile on the counter to be counted. The interior of the Prairie Dove had done a startling transformation. Men were moving out of the front doors almost in a solid mass while two men carried the sagging body of the shot down dealer out somewhere into the road. The stage show had stopped, the curtain down. The place was almost deserted. Somebody said, "This means the end of the Prairie Dove. Too bad."

"Too bad, hell!"replied another's voice. "Any house can win on percentages. Anytime they won't let a man with a lucky streak take out a few dollars they ought to go out of business. Serves 'em right. These trail herd men're spending thousands of dollars every month in places like this. They oughta get a run for their money."

A few men still lingered at the one hundred foot bar. The dealers at the deserted gambling tables stood watching, uncertain and confused. Nothing like this had ever happened to a gambling place before. It was fantastic. Nothing else could describe it.

Blackie had let go of the dealer's wrist. Jude turned. He saw Harrison and he saw Grady. And he saw Harrison's left hand going to the pistol. Then Jude's actions became automatic. Some strange impulse he didn't understand caused him to reach for the pistol at Blackie's left hip. It came free easily from the worn holster; far more easily than he could ever have imagined. He spun with it in his hand as Harrison's gun roared.

Jude didn't know how to shoot from the hip. That much he had learned from firing the old Sharps. A man trying to hit a target didn't shoot that way. He took careful aim.

Jude lined the sights of the heavy .45 straight with Harrison's belly and pulled the trigger, remembering what Blackie had told him.

THE gun roared. The barrel kicked up because he had been holding the weapon too loosely. He was unaware of

Blackie wheeling, the other gun out, staring. Harrison was going down in a lazy sort of way. The heavy bullet, catching him in the throat, had flung him back against the bar by the sheer power of its shock, and the head of the NP rustler pool was half falling, half sliding as he went down. His bandaged right hand made a kind of thudding sound against the brass rail of the bar as he came to rest face down in the thin film of sawdust and laid still.

He was dead. Grady bolted toward the front door.

Blackie's quite calm voice said, "Jude, you saved my life. I won't forget. Cash in your chips while I watch the crowd."

There wasn't any reason to watch the crowd. A man said loudly that it was self defense and that the other man had fired the first shot. The two disgruntled marshals were quick too. They agreed. Jude cashed in his chips, sliding the money into his pocket. He was sick, his stomach all upset. He hadn't meant to kill a man. The action had been automatic. He had known only that his friend Blackie was being shot down from behind by a man without the courage to face him. He wasn't sure whether he had been afraid of being killed or not. He knew only that he had acted instinctively.

He was unaware that his stabbing motion, the wheel of his young body with the gun gripped in his right hand, had been as fast as a striking puma leaping from its place of concealment onto the back of an unsuspecting deer. But Harrison had fired only one shot.

"My God!" an awed voice said. "Did you see that kid move? Like a streak of lightning. I've seen four men killed in Abilene, including one man by Hickock, but I never saw anything to match it."

The two marshals were pushing back the crowd now trying to return through the swinging corner doors. "Go on," they were yelling. "It's all over. Get out of here before we jail the whole bunch of you."

A number of the girls had converged. Angelica stood in the forefront, looking at Jude.

"Yew look sick, honey boy," she said. "But you come on with me and I'll soon make you forget that. My, how you fooled me, you good looking cowboy. Come on, honey boy."

He flung off her possessing arm. "I'm going back to the hotel," he said.

He started pushing his way through the crowd. Edwina had put in an appearance standing beside Blackie. He heard her voice and Blackie's voice too call for him to come back.

He went on, out into the cooling caress of the night air, heading toward the hotel. He returned to the room where his mother's picture was still in the sack.

That night he slept in the room alone, next to Blackie's unused bed.

CHAPTER XII

EVEN in a tough trail town like Abilene the two killings had the town buzzing next morning, particularly since the Prairie Dove had closed its doors. Reports were going around that it had changed owners and would reopen again that day under "new management;" reports that caused loud and sardonic laughter. Jude got up early and went down to breakfast. One eye was discolored and when he pressed his fingers against the flesh of his right cheek the feel was spongy. He went into the big dining room and sat down at a corner table, conscious that men were staring at him. Nute Shelby was eating breakfast with the Travers family. Jude saw the girl Nell looking at him. He couldn't tell whether it was curiosity or the fact that he'd killed the head of the Nester Pool the night before in a gunfight. The buzz of conversation that had ceased at his entrance soon resumed. Jude ordered and ate.

Shelby pushed back from the table and came over. He sat down and rolled a cigarette.

"Mornin'," he said curtly.

"Morning," Jude said.

The girl brought his coffee and he finished off the meal.

"Where's Blackie?" the foreman asked.

"At the Prairie Dove, I reckon."

Shelby's eyebrows raised. "Don't you know?"

No, I reckon I don't. I didn't stay there last night."

"I see. Got all your stuff bought?"

"I got to get a bedroll, shaving outfit, some saddle and a pair of chaps."

"I'll go with you to pick up the saddle. I know what you need for work down there. When you start pulling a bogged down cow out of a mudhole you want something that won't come apart. Got enough money?"

"I got plenty."

"Then let's get going," the foreman said, rising. He was packing his gun. He looked at Jude. "Where's your six shooter?"

Jude told him. A harsh look came over Shelby's face. "Go back upstairs and get it! I was around town last night trying to round up the boys after that fight. More NP men are reported in town and they're sworn to get you."

So that was why the foreman was going with him to buy a saddle? They went out into the street. It was teeming with the usual early morning traffic. Jude felt strange with the .44 revolver stuck down the front of his waistband. He made his purchases under Shelby's critical eye, including eight hundred rounds of .44 caliber cartridges. He got the blacksnake with the new popper and spares. By the time he finished the hotel room was becoming crowded. Shelby had gone with him. There was a new respect in the trail boss's eyes Jude was no longer a nester kid. He was one of the outfit now, and again he'd done them a turn. He'd killed the man everybody knew but couldn't prove was head of the rustler ring.

Shelby picked up Jude's new belt and broke out a box of cartridges. He filled it while Jude stacked his purchases. When they went out into the street again the lead studded object encircled Jude's wiry waist . . . and felt as though it and the six shooter weighed a ton.

"We're going to hunt up the boys and get out of here," Shelby said. "Travers' orders. The NP men are out to get us after that fracas last night. They're spoiling for a pitched battle."

"I'm sorta sorry about that."

"Don't be," snapped the foreman. "Blackie would have got him anyhow before we left town. It was in the cards, and you did us a good turn. Soon as we find the boys and I get somebody to side you, I'll go to the jail and get Bugger out. Dirty trick, putting that man in jail. He's a good hand."

"Grady's across the street," Jude replied, pointing to the lean-to gambling place and bar where the fight had taken place. Back of it was a shabby looking hotel.

"Grady won't be going back with us," came the grunted answer. "I'm firing him the minute I set eyes on him. He always was a little too friendly with Harrison."

Jude asked about the lost steers. Shelby shook his head. They were heading across the tracks for the bawdy houses. "I've got a man at the stockyards but they didn't show up. Going back we'll spread out a few miles apart and check any herd coming up," and he went on ahead to describe the markers.

"But we're rolling out of here the minute the outfit gets together," Shelby added.

They found Mike in one of the bars. He had been up all night and was happily, gloriously drunk. There was an ugly looking cut over his left eyebrow and his upper lip was swollen. He surveyed their approach and grinned happily.

"Where," he asked, "have I seen those faces before? Last time it was red whiskered geese in cowboy boots and spurs walking along the ceiling. Now it's faces. Ugly faces. The ugliest, mos' frightening faces I ever saw. My mammy told me not to drink likker."

"You're a hell of a pretty looking sight," grunted the foreman as they hauled up together.

Mike straightened from the bar. "Im a handsome man," he said with alcoholic dignity. "The most beautiful man on the prairies. Someday I'm going to write a poem about my manly qualities. Would you like me to sing you a song?"

"Come on," ordered the foreman curtly.

"I'd rather sing. Something mournful and heart-rending. About a' unhappy young cowpuncher who split his old lady's head open with a pole ax because she used up all his wages drinking whiskey."

He rocked back on his heels and grabbed at the bar.

"Get hold of his other arm, Jude," Shelby grunted. "Come on, Mike."

"But I like this place," Mike Kessler protested as they made a threesome toward the front door. "It's refined. It's cultured. Just the hight atmosphere for a gentleman drinker. And besides," he added plaintively, "they've still got two barrels of whiskey back of the bar. I know—I went around and counted 'em."

THERE was a seedy looking restaurant next door and the three rocked in. It was cluttered by a few cow punchers and a number of blowsy, sleepy-eyed women drinking coffee.

They got four cups of steaming black coffee down Mike that morning in Abilene. It didn't seem to help much. Jude reached into his pocket and brought out the money for them.

"He's sure got a load on," he grinned at Shelby.

"He'll get it off when he gets into a lather and starts back. Come on."

They rocked back into the street again. At the corner of the building Mike hauled up short, freeing his arms.

They hauled him up again and started back across the tracks. Four men passed them. One was a burly individual with a fat, sour visage above a big belly. His eyelashes were gone. The lids were red rimmed. He gave them a challenging look, made a remark under his breath to his companions, and passed on.

"Tolliver," Shelby said. "Red Tolliver. Close friend of Harrison and a mean man in a fight. Don't forget his face, Jude."

"Be pretty hard to forget it."

"Don't forget mine either," Mike mumbled happily.

They met Bugger coming across the tracks. The marshal on day duty had turned him out that morning.

"Mornin', Mistuh Nute," he said.

"Where's Peanut?" demanded the foreman.

"Ain't seen him. I just got outa that louse house ovah theah. Kept me in all night. Peanut tried to get me out but they said no suh, I stays in. So I shuh stayed in."

"Get hold of Mike's other arm. Head for that livery over there."

Bugger got hold of Mike's other arm and Shelby went on ahead. By the time they arrived he had a rented team and light wagon. They threw Mike into the back, where he curled up and promptly went to sleep. The foreman looked at Jude.

"We'll go down to the hotel and load up this rig with yourn and Blackie's stuff. Then, Bugger, you drive him out to the remuda corral where the wagon is. I hired some men to put it up and watch the cavvy for us last night." He looked over at Mike, who was snoring. "When you get out there, Bugger, you leave Mike lay and saddle up a horse. Go hunt up the remuda and cut out the wagon teams and corral them. We'll find the rest of the boys. We're hauling out of here as soon as we all get organized."

They went down to the street to the hotel and began carrying goods downstairs and piling them into the wagon. Jude got Mike over onto his new tarp and let him sleep. Bugger climbed up and swung the team around at a trot up the street. Cic came by as Jude and the foreman stood on the boardwalk. He was in pretty good shape.

"Mawnin', boys," he greeted, and looked at Jude's eye. "I been hearin' reports about you, boy. Good work."

"Cic, we're getting out of here right away to avoid trouble," Shelby told the older man. "Start rounding up the boys. You go with Jude over to the Prairie Dove to get Blackie. Tell him I said to haul out of bed with that woman fast. And you keep your hand close to your gun. The NP are after his scalp for downing Harrison last night and I just passed Red Tolliver and three others going that way. Keep out of their way, understand?"

"Me and trouble are old friends, boss."

"You heard what I said!" snapped the foreman, his eyes blazing. "Keep out of trouble. One more T4 gunfight after last night and we'll be in trouble with the marshals. We've got one hell of a reputation in this town this morning. At least Jude and Blackie have. A two gunman killing a crooked dealer and another T4 man killing a two gunman. Now get going. Seen Pokey?"

"Nobody has. He just plumb disappeared within an hour after we got in last evenin'."

SHELBY went on down the street (as Jude later found out, he went to the undertaking parlor to pay for Tolson's coffin and other burial expenses) and the two others went the opposite direction.

"I sure been hearing plenty of talk this mornin' about you, Jude," Cic remarked, reaching for his tobacco sack. "Everybody's talkin' about how that kid cow puncher plumb salivated Harrison. Wouldn't have meant too much if Harrison hadn't been packin' two guns and shot first."

"I'm no cow puncher," Jude said.

Cic stopped long enough to lick and light the quirly. He exhaled twin streams of smoke from his nostrils. "You will be," he said succinctly.

The front door of the Prairie Dove was padlocked . . . about the only saloon in town that was. They rounded the corner and went down the side street to the back, into an alley. A flight of stairs ran up to a landing that made entrance to the hall on the second floor. They clumped up and entered. All over the place was the smell of cheap perfume. It permeated the air. This was where the dancehall girls lived.

"Question is," Cic said, scratching his head with an index finger, "is which one is the domain of our romantic Blackie and his bee-utiful bride of a night."

"I don't know," Jude grinned uncertainly.

"Well, boy, I know how to find out. You stand by and catch me as they throw me out. If I come sailing out head first you'll know *thet* ain't the right one." He opened a door and peered in. "Oh, I beg your pardon, sleeping lady."

The next one brought a squeal and a, "Get outa heah."

"I begs yourn too, lady," Cic said gallantly, lifting his hat to expose a generous expanse of bald skull. "I was hunting my spare underwear. You seen 'em?"

"Get outa heah!" The voice was high and shrill with indignation.

They tried a few more with varying results. Cic finally stuck his head cautiously through a door leading to a corner room. He turned, grinning. "We struck paydirt this time, boy. Come on."

Jude gingerly followed him into a large, well furnished room with a big bed in one corner. Blackie was in it.

One of Blackie's bare feet protruded through the bars of the iron bedstead. Cic, grinning, got hold of it and hauled. Results were prompt. Blackie let out a roar and half sat up, astonishment driving the sleep from his eyes.

"What the hell?" he yelled.

Cic still had hold of the foot. "I was just showin' Jude how to pull a bogged down calf outa a mudhole," he explained blandly. "If we're goin' to make a cow hand outa him he oughta get started soon's possible."

HE HAULED harder and Blackie slid half way down the bed, pulling the covers off Edwina, who squealed and modestly grabbed for them. Blackie was struggling and cursing, the full length of his bared leg now sticking out through the bars, the foot still gripped firmly in Cic's big hands.

"Leggo, you, dammit, leggo!" Blackie roared.

"What's goin' on in theah?" came Angelica's sleepy voice.

"Leggo!" Blackie yelled again.

Cic let go. "Pee-yew," he said, wrinkling up his nose at Jude. "Did he wash them hoofs last night, Jude?"

Blackie slid back to the head and sat up, scratched his hairy chest. He yawned and reached for cigarette papers and tobacco on a chair beside the bed.

"Good morning, Jude," Edwina yawned prettily. "How's our wild, gun shooting cowboy this morning?"

"What's goin' on in heah?" demanded Angelica's voice again.

Jude turned. She stood in the arch leading to the other room, wearing nothing but a thin night gown, her young breast plainly visible beneath it.

"Oh, it's yew, Jude? How come you run away last night?"

"I was thinking about something else," Jude replied.

"Oh . . . that trouble. Yew comin' back tonight?"

"We won't be here tonight. We're hauling out today."

Blackie looked a question at Cic, who nodded. "That's right, Blackie. Travers' orders. Nute says come out of here fast and get back to the outfit."

"How come?"

"The NP's hunting trouble and the boss don't want anymore. Red Tolliver's in town."

"That pot-bellied four flusher? I'll get him too like I'd have got Harrison if Jude hadn't beat me to it." He lit the cigarette. Angelica had gone back to bed.

"You better get rolling," Cic advised.

Blackie's grunt came plainly. "We spend weeks driving up the trail just to have a little fun, and now after one night the boss says to go back. You tell him I said go to hell. I've got seventeen hundred dollars left and I'm going to spend part of it, right here. If the outfit is getting out of town to avoid trouble, then they don't need me. If it's just a matter of hitching up and hauling out then they don't need me for that either. You tell Nute I said to go on without me. I've got some business that'll take me a few days. Tell him I'll show up in time. Jude, you put my saddle and stuff in the hotel room we had. Take the bedroll on back to the ranch. Don't leave me a horse. I'll take a stage and beat you home."

He slid back under the covers and smoked, stretched out. His two guns hung on the head of the bedstead.

"All right," Jude replied. He was thinking of Blackie remaining alone in Abilene with the NE outfit still in town. But Blackie knew his own mind, and he could take care of himself. Jude told Edwina goodbye and turned to follow Cic out.

"Jude," called Angelica's voice. "Ain't you goin' to come in *here* an tell me goodbye?"

"No," Jude said. "Goodbye."

"Well, goodbye yourself!"

The bed springs creaked as she flounced over with her back to him. Cic led the way down the stairs.

"That Blackie," he chuckled, and then grew serious. "You know, Jude, I'd sure hate to see Blackie get tangled up with a woman and go wrong. He'd make the worst road agent and all round desperado the Texas country ever saw."

CHAPTER XIII

THEY worked hard all morning getting the outfit organized, the rented livery outfit making trip after trip between town and to where the wagons were parked. The men gradually straggled in, most of them showing the effects of the night before. They hauled Pokey out in the rig, in a drunken stupor. Jude had finally found him in a hotel room, two empty quart bottles beside his bed. Pokey hadn't even changed clothes.

Mrs. Travers and Nell were going home by stage. The girl had flatly refused to make the trip with the wagons. "I reckon," Cic remarked to Jude, "that she's gone a mite uppity with a year of fancy schoolin' back east."

"Looks that way."

And there had been no fight. Word had spread around town that the two outfits might decide to shoot it out, and the night lawmen hadn't gone to bed. They and the two day men were patrolling the town, shotguns slung over their arms, grim warning to all concerned that Abilene would have law and order. Gun fights were expected and tolerated. But there would be no pitched battle. Abilene was protecting its citizens and their property.

Travers and Nute Shelby were everywhere, directing, giving orders. The wiry owner was a good man in the saddle, quick and decisive in his actions. He sold off the better part of the remuda and the two lead steers. They wanted to make all possible time on the return trip. Jude would drive the chuckwagon until Pokey came out of it and took over. Right now the cook was asleep back of the chuckwagon's seat.

Jude had put down his disappointment. That new saddle and bridle were waiting to be used. The foreman had sensed it too. He had said, not unkindly, "You'll have to handle the wagon for Pokey until he sobers up, Jude. Then you can rope you a horse out of the cavvy and try out that new rig."

He hadn't said a word when Jude had gave him Blackie's message.

Jude make a final trip into town in the rig, Cic riding beside him. He liked the older man almost as much as he liked Blackie. Cic was a range wise veteran, friendly, and with almost as much of a ribald sense of humor as Mike Kessler. And Cic was playing bodyguard for him until the outfit got clear of town.

"Let's have a final drink before we go," he suggested as they pulled up. It'll be a long dry trip back. Them four quarts I got hid in my warbag won't last long if the boys find out. I oughta get me a good padlock and chain and put on thet sack."

They went in, Bugger waiting. His trade wasn't appreciated in the bars. They stepped into the swinging doors . . . and came face to face with Red Tolliver and his men coming out.

"Hello, Red," Cic greeted amiably, though there was wariness in every line of his middle-aged body.

Tolliver looked at him without speaking, then at Jude. "So you're the nester who plugged Jim, eh?"

"I'm the nester who got in the second shot."

"Goin' back to Texas with the outfit?"

"That's my business."

"I'll make it mine. Son, you just take an older man's advice and stick with the Kansas plow handles. You'll live longer thataway. Texas can be a plumb unhealthy country for certain people."

"I always wanted to see what it looked like," Jude answered calmly. "I reckon I can stand the climate."

"Son," Red Tolliver said ominously, "it ain't goin' to be the climate you'll have to worry about. Come on, men."

They brushed on through the swinging doors and disappeared.

"Nice friendly feller," Cic commented as they ordered.

"What's he do?"

The scar-faced man viewed that one with a glint of humor in his mild eyes. "He rustles cows like the rest of them. He's got a place over in the brakes on Double Mountain River. Supposed to own a few head, like all the others. But them cows of his breed so fast thet there's even reports the *bulls* are havin' calves too. Twins at thet. Let's drink."

They drank and Cic bought an extra pint. He went out and handed it up to Bugger. "Here, Bugger, stick thet down outa sight and don't drink it until we get out of town. Better not let Nute see it."

They drove to the store and got the final list of chuckwagon supplies and returned. Bugger took the rig back to the stable and walked the mile back to the wagons. All the riders except Mike were saddled. The cavvy was grazing southward. The outfit was ready to roll.

Jude climbed up and took the reins. Back of him Pokey groaned and turned over.

They were rolling.

THE outfit made good time that first day. Pokey came groaning out in time to fix supper. Three men were missing. Grady and Blackie and Tolson. Tolson would never come back. He lay in a fresh grave in Abilene's boothill, victim of a bullet through the back. Whoever the killer or killers had been (they hadn't let whiskey loosen their tongues enough to do any boasting. And the odds had come out even. One man down from each outfit.

Full dawn had not broken the next morning before they were under way again. Jude rode one of the gentler horses; one that didn't try to take out the kinks by pitching before it settled down to the day's work. The new saddle fitted him and the bull-nose *tapideras* felt good to his feet. Shelby had been insistent about them.

"They'll keep your feet a little warmer in winter," he had explained, "they'll save you getting an inch long mesquite thorn driven through your foot when you're busting down through the brush after a steer with its tail up over its back, and there's no chance of your foot slipping through and you getting dragged and kicked to death under the belly of a mean horse."

The prairie flowed by, the miles dropping behind. Jude watched everything the men did and mentally filed the knowledge back in his mind. Muscles he hadn't used before began to complain; but by the time they camped at Gramma Creek he was getting used to the saddle. When they pulled out next morning Jude rolled over to the foreman.

He reined up alongside. "I reckon I'll leave the outfit for a little while," he said through the dawn. "Got a little business to take care of. I'll catch up by noon or maybe this evenin'."

Shelby nodded. He had developed a more friendly attitude toward Jude than with any of the others. His manner, when he spoke, was far less curt. "I understand, Jude. Take your time."

"I won't be long."

He rode off across the now familiar country where he had hunted with the old Sharps years before, when the gun was almost as big as himself. He'd been four when his mother and father had bought the farm with her money. Many times he had speculated how a woman like his mother ever could have married a man like his father. But the place had been the only home he remembered and nostalgia was bringing him back to spend a little while in the house, to look at the writing desk in her bedroom, and even to tell his father goodbye.

The sun was up when he topped a final rise and saw the farm a half mile away. He jogged toward it and a plume of smoke began wisping up from the kitchen stove chimney. His father was up and had built a fire.

He was three hundred yards from the house when the door opened and he saw the woman, half dressed, appear in the doorway; and even at that distance he recognized her. The girl, big and raw-boned, from the next farm.

Cold anger filled him. The thought of her sleeping in his mother's bed caused his lips to tighten.

Without a word he reined over and rode away.

He didn't look back.

Shelby shot him a peculiar look when he loped up with the outfit but said nothing. A man's personal business was his own. You weren't supposed to ask questions. The outfit rolled on. It crossed the Kansas line and cut across a stretch of Oklahoma Territory. Stolid Indians rode by, sullen, hostility in their looks, but making no fight. The U. S. Cavalry had pretty well whipped the fight out of them, except for occasional sporadic raids by hot blooded young bucks. They were bitter, disillusioned, and a good many of them, the big buffalo herds gone, were hungry.

On the afternoon when they crossed over into Texas Jude was riding near the lumbering chuckwagon where Pokey sat nodding back of his plodding team. Cic and Mike Kessler rode over.

"Look at 'er!" Cic grinned with a sweep of his hand ahead. "Ain't she a beauty. You're in God's country now, Jude. The purtiest in the world."

Jude grinned and looked back to the sweep of the northern horizon behind them. "Looks no different to me than over there across the line," he observed.

Cic stared at him, a look of indignation on his bullet shattered face. He turned to Mike.

"You heard thet?" he exclaimed. "You heard it with your own ears what Jude said. It's sacrilage, thet's what it is!" He sucked in a big breath of Texas air.

"They hang men in Texas for less than that," Mike said severely. "Now supposin' you just take another look and try again. I don't want to see you get fired before we got to the ranch."

Jude took another look. "Well," he finally admitted, grinning, "come to think of it, there is a difference. It's sure more beautiful up ahead than it is back there."

"Of course it is. Any fool as wasn't plumb blind could see it. You just didn't look close enough thet first time."

"And don't ever let it happen again," Mike admonished.

AND on the following Monday afternoon they crossed the north boundary of the T4 range. It was August and the rains that had been so good to the Kansas crops had spread their tentacles down here too. The range looked good. There were mesquites growing in bunches and then in small forests. Hackberry trees threw great spreads of shade beneath which cattle stood kicking and switching at heel flies until they raised their heads and trotted away, horns held high, looking back at the cavalcade of men, wagons, and horses. Great winding gullies cut their lengths for miles where, during heavy rains, the brown, almost red water rushed down in torrents.

"The old man is plannin' to start building dams one of these days," Cic said. "Too bad for you too, Jude. He'll probably get the idea thet a nester from Kansas is plumb handy with a team and scraper."

"I'll give it a try if he wants it."

"Next he'll be wantin' to put up windmills. Thet would be somethin'. Me out there with a post hole digger boring for water like a danged gopher!"

"I hear he's going to build a new ranch house with some of that pile of dinero he got for the herd," Mike added. "Heard him talkin' to Nute about it. So maybe we'll turn carpenter. First time I hit my thumb with a nail little Miss Nellie is going to be told she can build that fancy house herself if she's so set on it. What she needs, that uppity young lady, is to be turned over somebody's knee and have her backside paddled."

Jude rode on, listening. He had sensed the quickening excitement of the men as they neared the home ranch, and he felt it in himself too. He had learned much on that trip south. He could rope his own horse now with ease and saddle up with a dexterity that told of a knack for such things. And Mike's one attempt at a practical joke had fallen flat. Jude had ridden the meek looking bronk Mike talked him into mounting one morning.

He had, as Mike put it, almost had to buy a new saddle horn on account of nearly choking it off with one hand, but he had ridden the horse until it got the kinks out.

CHAPTER XIV

THE T4 group of ranch buildings lay on a prairie rise a mile east of a big gully cutting its way north and south, its edges fringed with scrubby mesquite.

Travers, like the stolid little day wrangler, had served in the Civil War, as a non-commissioned officer under the man who now worked for him. That was why Peanut, and the Negro boy he had brought with him as a sort of boy servant, had gotten the job and was now a permanent fixture on the ranch. Few of the men knew that often at night, when the lights were out in the other buildings, the two men sat talking over the old days; night patrols, cavalry skirmishes, firing across rivers and in the timber, and how General Jeb Stuart had died. There was a close affinity between these two, an affinity that none of the men, with the possible exception of Nute Shelby, suspected. For they didn't talk.

The war was still too fresh in people's minds. It had been a bitter struggle in which more than 600,000 men had lost their lives. The South 100,000 more than the North. Four long years of it.

And the men who came out of it, men like Travers and Sutherworth, wanting only to forget and take up life anew, as men always do after wars.

So Travers had returned to Texas. Land was free, hundred of rolling miles covered with lush grass, sometimes knee high. There had been no time to bother with the branding of cattle during that four years, and they had bred by the tens of thousands; roaming the prairie and mountains unmarked and unbranded. The word "maverick" had taken on a different meaning now. You no longer recognized the ownership of an animal, or "critter", just because it bore no brand on its hip or a gotch in its ears. It was everyman for himself.

Travers had come back, found enough money to hire men who would work for almost nothing, and began his iron, down in southern Texas. But he was a plains man from the north, and when he had collected all that his men could handle and his meager pocketbook would allow he drove north to the Double Moutain country, wintering on the Salt Fork of the Brazos, living in crudely built dugouts.

The years had been hard for they were all cattle poor. Their herds roamed by the hundreds and often by the thousands, and there hadn't been much of a market until the railroad pushed its way into Abilene. That T4 herd Nute Shelby had taken up the trail was the first; and now the future looked rosy.

The main ranch house that Jude glimpsed before sundown was a structure of half mud, half stone, its seven rooms sprawled out in irregular fashion, built a room at a time through the years. It was an awkward looking place, built from no particular plan, but it was comfortable. It originally had faced the west, a long low veranda running the entire length . . . a mistake that Travers and his wife had discovered too late. For in summer the hot sun bore down and, late in the afternoon, gave no shade.

Therefore Travers, with his practical turn of mind, had gone around to the east, cut more front doors, and built another porch. The roof sloped gently, enough to shed rain, and at the north end was a huge fireplace chimney.

That was the place they passed that late Monday afternoon in August. Jude let his eyes play over the other crudely erected structures. So this was to be his new home?

Travers and Shelby had loped on ahead earlier in the afternoon and were nowhere in sight when Pokey finally pulled the big chuckwagon to a halt by one of the pole corrals and swung stiffly down.

"Whoosh!" he blew out a big sigh of relief. "She's all over fer this year!"

Jude swung down easily and unsaddled. He released his sweaty mount and left the saddle on the ground, not forgetting Blackie's admonitions about taking care of equipment. He wondered if Blackie had beaten them "home."

"I'll help you unhitch," Jude said, divesting himself of his leather chaps. He slung the gunbelt back into place again. There had been rains coming down and the new belt fitted snugly into place now. And that holster was used to the gun. He had burned up about two hundred rounds of ammunition on the way down. He liked the buck of the weapon against his palm.

The others were unsaddling and a number of men were strolling toward them. Greetings, grins and good natured banter was passing back and forth.

"Lookit the city slickers!" jeered a tow-headed young puncher.

"How was them gals?"

"Where'd you git thet haircut?"

"Go way, you prairie puncher. I been to the big city an' I ain't mixin' with no ordinary cow hands no longer."

"Who's the new puncher, an' where's Blackie and Grady an' Tolson? Did Webbly quit? Betcha he got drunk in town an' got locked up."

"Didn't Blackie show up yet?" Cic asked a tall, lean hipped puncher, in surprise.

"Hell, no! Aint he with you-all?"

"He was supposed to be here ahead of us, on the stage? Miz Travers and the kid get in?"

"Yup. Four days ago. They're all rested up now. She's sure growed up, ain't she? Where's Tolson an' the others? Ain't they with you?"

CIC spoke in a low voice and all of a sudden he was ringed with curious, quiet-eyed men. Jude, helping Pokey unharness, caught the word Harrison. He was aware then that eight or ten pair of eyes had swung his way and were appraising him.

"So *he* got Harrison?"

"After Jim fired the first shot. He jerked one of Blackie's guns and killed him. Chain lightning, them as seen it said."

"Killer, huh? Hell, he ain't more'n a kid."

"He's old enough. He can take care of himself."

"I reckon. One of these gun throwing younkers, eh? Wal, I'm shore glad he got Harrison. That's one thorn out of our side, I reckon."

"How's things since we left?"

"Not good, not bad. There's only eight of us and we been goin' from daylight to dark, ridin' the hoofs off our cayuses and the seats off our pants. But them nesters are still rustlin' us."

"Yeah, I reckon. But them nesters are goin' to keep on til hell breaks loose on this range one of these days. Any of the boys been to town lately?"

"I was in today to git the mail," the slim hipped puncher—his name was "Slim" Connors—said.

"See anything of the NP men who went north with the herd?"

"Nope. Just some of 'em in, clumpin' around in their shoes, buyin' a few supplies. It's dam' funny how a nester can take off them shoes and put on a pair of boots and get plumb handy with a runnin' iron."

"Tolliver'll probably stay in Abilene for awhile. I got a hunch them two hundred head'll show up an' mebbe he'll have somethin' to do with 'em. Nute wanted to spread out an' try to pick up word of them on the way back, but it had been ten days before an' Travers said let it go. I reckon he figgers thet with all the money he got fer the other twenty-eight hundred he could afford it."

They moved toward the bunkhouse and Jude, releasing the last of the four horse chuckwagon team, picked up his saddle. Joe had stopped the bedroll wagon over by the bunkhouse and had unhitched. Men were carrying their tarps inside. Jude strode over with Pokey. The cook would leave the supplies in the wagon until morning.

"Put your saddle on the fence until tomorrow, Jude," Pokey said. "Not any chance of rain this kind of weather."

Jude obeyed and they went toward the bunkhouse. It was a box shaped structure, also of mud and sand stone, a good sixty feet in length and more than twenty feet wide. Travers had built for the future on that one. He had known that his outfit would grow, and the materials for the building could be had for the hauling. They stepped inside onto a hard packed dirt floor, under a ceiling eight and a half feet high. It was cool, and the lines of bunks along the walls with tables in the center looked inviting. Men were lounging about, waiting for supper, the buzz of animated conversation filling the room.

It ceased abruptly as Jude entered. He glanced about him, looking for a bunk.

"Take thet one on the end, next to mine, Jude," Cic called. "Over there," pointing. "Throw your stuff in it and we'll go get some grub pretty soon. I'm dawg-goned hungry. My stomach is all wore out from eatin' that slumgullion Pokey called trail grub. Gawd, it was awful, boys. It woulda killed a razorback hawg."

"Then why didnt' it kill yu?" blazed Pokey in the face of laughter. "I noticed yu et *yore* share of it! I ain't never seen no man who could eat louder an' grumble louder than him," he snorted to the others. "He gits canned corn an' he goes *'slurp-slurp-slurp'* an' says he wished he had tomatoes. He gits canned tomatoes an' he goes *'slurp-slurp-slurp'* an' groans as how he likes corn. He gits fresh killed beef an' he goes *'crunch-slurp-slosh'* an' mumbles about a goat steak he once et an' how good it was."

"Goat," murmured Cic. "So *thet's* what we had in the soup one night? I *thought* thet was a piece of its horn I was chawin' on."

"Go to hell, the whole bunch of yu!" screeched Pokey, and fled out the door.

JUDE went out to the bedroll wagon and got the new tarp, inside of which were wrapped his other belongings. He brought in the warbag and tucked it under the bunk. The straw was comparatively fresh and he unrolled the tarp, straightening it out meticulously. He was stalling for time, wanting to meet the others, but aware that he was a stranger . . . and the man who had killed Harrison, head of the nester pool.

He took off his gunbelt, hung it on a peg driven into the mud chinking of the wall, brought out his shaving outfit and placed it on a small shelf above.

"When do you think Blackie'll git back?" a voice asked.

Cic's mild laughter followed. "You know Blackie. He ain't beholden to no man. Blackie just don't give a dam' fer anybody or anything. He won about eighteen hundred over the wheel before him an' Jude started bustin' cartridges around plumb promiscuous and put two men down. How old you reckon she was, Jude?"

"About twenty-one, or two."

The men were all ears. They were womenless men, living lonely lives on the far and wide expanses of the ranges, singing their mournful songs and day dreaming; dreams in which there always was a beautiful woman—as beautiful as this singer—who would fall in love with them.

They listened, enraptured.

"I'd say eighteen or nineteen," Cic said. "About the same age as her friend in the next room that was so all sot on Jude. What was her name, Jude—thet purty one about eighteen who wanted you to come in who would fall in love with them.

"Angelica," Jude grunted, trying to appear busy with his new stuff. He pushed the leather chaps under his bunk, next to the warbag, aware that, again, their curious eyes were upon him.

He had killed "Twogun" Jim Harrison, head of the nester rustlers, he had stooped to helping the cook unharness—something no respectable cow puncher would do—, and now he had refused to make love to what apparently was a beautiful eighteen year old dancehall girl.

To the love and women starved men, this was something not understandable. A strange one, this quiet speaking new younker!

About that time ringing iron gave off sound from somewhere without and there was a general exodus toward the door of the bunkhouse. They clumped through and Jude went with them, his hat left behind.

The sun was down far in the west, throwing red colors against a distant mountain butte—Old Bald Knob—which was bare of grass around its rocky base. That much Jude could tell from the rocks. A milk pen calf bawled from somewhere behind him and he saw smoke wisping from the ranch house kitchen. Near it was a smaller house, where Nute Shelby lived with his wife and three children.

Mike had fallen to the rear, beside Jude.

"Where does Bugger eat?" Jude asked.

Mike grinned and rolled a wise eye in its socket. His eyebrows went up. "Bugger is a special character around here by virtue of the fact that he is slightly sunburned and can't eat with the regular punchers. But by a strange coincidence we have a Negro cook in the ranch house—a lusty looking wench not quite thirty, and a widow—who likes him. So what more natural than Bugger eats in the kitchen? I'd not be so debased as to start false rumors, but I somehow suspect that the horse wrangling Bugger is slightly enamored of the lady several years his senior. But true love does not let jail bars—no, dammit, that's not it. I guess I've forgotten."

JUDE grinned and went on, glad for Bugger's sake. He liked the Negro wrangler.

The building toward which they were heading was some forty yards north of the bunkhouse and one of the strangest looking Jude had ever seen. Its walls were not more than five feet above the ground, the roof sloping. When they arrived Jude understood why.

It was a half dugout.

The ground had been dug down about four feet and the half house built over it.

They filed down steps onto a dirt floor, into a big room about thirty feet long and more than twenty wide. Two big tables with plates and knives and forks laid out were ranged along each wall. At the rear was a big cook stove, over which another cook, apron around his waist, sweated. Pokey was giving him a hand.

They began serving huge bowls of steaming red beans, spiced with chili and beef, followed by platters of potatoes. There was canned corn and canned tomatoes, and squarely in the middle of each table, on a flat slab of red rock, stood a monster coffee pot. Jude's eyes spotted what looked like a peach cobbler on the back of the stove.

One thing about Travers. He apparently fed his men well. They took seats and began to eat. Normally they ate pretty much in silence, as hungry men do, but more than half of the outfit had just got back from the long drive to Kansas and conversation ran riot. Jude kept his silence and listened. He knew they were watching him as the new man of the outfit, judging him, probing him. The memory of Harrison was very fresh in their minds. He let his glance rove around the table and discovered that Peanut was missing.

"Where's Peanut?" he asked Mike, across the table, to make conversation.

"Up at the house. For some strange reason the boss likes Peanut. They must be old friends, or something. He eats with the family."

Jude went back to his plate and finished the meal, taking a helping of the peach cobbler, but careful not to take too much. This much he had learned about range manners. There might not be enough to go around to satisfy all appetites for sweets. Sweets were a luxury and, in the absence of alcohol, the men craved them.

They finished and leaned back, reaching for and rolling cigarettes. Then Bugger's dark face appeared in the doorway.

"Mistuh Jude, the boss man say when you-all finish suppuh you's to come ovuh to the house an' talk wif him."

CHAPTER XV

THE Travers family had been having supper at about the same time the men had been called from the bunkhouse. The owner himself sat at the head of the table, his wife to his right and his daughter to his left. "Colonel" Sutherworth ate at the opposite end.

To the men of the outfit he was "Peanut" the wrangler. In the house he was Colonel Sutherworth, a secret rigidly kept by the members of the family and Jessie, the colored cook. Two meals of the day he ate with the men, but in the evening the former Confederate officer dined with the family in the house.

The dining room was in the south wing. When Travers had first built the place there had been but two rooms. The huge north living room with its five foot fireplace of red sandstone and the south dining room. Doors had been a luxury then, so it had been practical to build a stone and mortar arch between the two.

They were dining now and Jessie came in with a steaming bowl in her dark hands. She began to serve and a touch of annoyance twisted at the corners of Nell Travers' pretty mouth.

"Jessie," she said tightly, "how many times have I told you since we arrived home that you serve from the *left* side?"

"Yassum, agreed Jessie, and shifted position. She was about twenty-eight, slightly buxom, the widow of a freighter helper who had been killed in a runaway three years before. The wagon had turned over on him. But Jessie was still slightly confused by the new turn of events. Before "Miss Nell" had gone away for a year of schooling back east the meals had simply been put on the table like the cook did down in the dugout. And now . . .

Jessie served.

Travers looked over at his petulant daughter and then at his wife. Amusement was in his eyes.

"Maybe," he said to his wife, "it was somethin 'of a mistake to send her away. If that's what they call 'higher education,' then I reckon I just don't want any of it."

"Father!" she exclaimed indignantly.

"You see. Before she went away she rode astraddle and called me Pa. Now she comes back with a fancy side saddle and calls me Father. Goddlemighty!" he swore, feelingly.

Jessie went back to the kitchen, through a curtained doorway. Bugger was busy over his plate.

"I jes' don't understand that Miss Nell

no mo'," the woman complained. "All these high falutin' manners since she got back home."

Bugger guffawed. "You-all jus' don't savvy, woman," he grinned. "You-all oughta been back in Gawgia when my mammy an' pappy worked fuh the Cunnel's folks. My mammy was a cook an' my Pappy was the butler. Mos' people worked in the fields an' you had to be somebody real 'special to be a butler. Dinin' tables a hunned foot long an' enough silvuh plates an' stuff to load down a wagon. You's jus' ignorant, thass all."

"All right, then you-all go in and serve em," snapped back the harassed Jessie. "Since you knows it all."

She started a return trip to the dining room and Bugger's guffaws of derision followed her.

In the dining room they finally finished the meal. The girl had gone to the front room, taking something from her father's desk, and returned. She came back and unrolled some paper on the table, pushing aside the dishes. Mrs. Travers looked dubious but the girl's father obviously was interested. He had spent years in the field as a soldier, more long hard years fighting the elements, away from his wife for months at a time; but now the tide was turning. That trail herd to Abilene had brought in more money than he had ever realized could be made in a year. It was time to give them the things he always had planned. The range was good, their cattle roamed by the thousands despite the rustlers, and there would be another herd go up next year.

Travers bent over the plans for the new house. He loked at his daughter and chuckled fondly.

"So that's where so much of the money I couldn't spare to send you went?" he asked. "I had to borrow from the bank in Alden, and talk my head off to old Barker to get more money to get it. And all the time you were spending it on one of them fancy—"

"Those, father. Not them."

" 'Those, Father,' " he mimicked. "You were spending it on one of those fancy architects to draw up plans for a fancy house. Well, let's have a look at 'em."

He took the papers, peering this way and that, a frown wrinkled his brow below the slightly grey streaked hair. He scratched his head.

"I'm damned if I can make head or tails of it," he finally said. He raised his face and looked at the man at the other end of the table. "Come here, Colonel. You know anything about this business?"

The wrangler got up, wiping his lips with a napkin. There hadn't been any napkins until "Miss Nell" came home from school. He bent over Travers' shoulder.

"As a mattuh of fact, Sergeant, ah had some of this in college. Let's see."

"You mean you savvy all these fancy lines an' drawings?"

"Why, suttinly. It's a nice looking house. A low front veranda moah suited to the west—"

"Porch. Where the hell's the porch? I'm damned if I can see it?"

The former Colonel pulled up a chair and began to explain. Travers listened, watched, and a light of excitement came into the owner's eyes. He finally rose, pushing back his chair.

"All right," he said with his decisive way of speaking. "We'll build it. A hundred yards north of here, where the ground rises a bit higher."

"And a little further away from the other buildings," his daughter put in.

"We'll get at it in the morning. Freight out supplies from town. Colonel, I always wanted you to have a better job than wrangling, but you insisted because you said it was easier than regular punching. Tomorrow you take charge of the building. Get workmen out here. Use any of the hands you want. But we start building tomorrow. Jessie!" he called.

JESSIE stuck her head through the curtains. She wore a maid's cap and a frilled white apron now, as of the last four days. Things were changing on the T4.

"Yassuh?"

"Tell Bugger to go get that young nester kid Jude and bring him in here."

"Yassuh." her head disappeared and, presently, the kitchen door rattled.

"Jude?" Sutherworth asked.

"That nester Nute picked up in Kansas. He's a team man. He'll do the freightin'."

"Isn't that the boy who shot Jim Harrison in Abilene?" Mrs. Travers inquired.

It was the wrangler who answered. "Yes, ma'm, that's the boy. Only he's not a boy. He's eighteen, he's got a little moah education than most of these heah cow punchers, and he's the quickest man to learn I evah saw."

Nell Travers sniffed. "I suppose he thinks that because he shot the head rustler of the Nester Pool he'll be too good to handle a freight team to build a new house. It will do him good to stay where he belongs—behind a team. And if he's any ideas that because he's being called up here to the house—"

Her father shot her a look, a glint in his eye. "If you're worried about him moonin' around you because I own the outfit, I don't think it'll cause you any trouble. I watched that kid all the way down the line. One thing I'll say for Nute—he knows how to pick men. That kid tends to his own business, he keeps his eyes and ears open and learns things, and if he don't get too handy with that gun he already can handle so fast he'll make one of the best hands this outfit ever had. Nute likes him, and that's good enough for me. You're getting to big for your britches, young lady."

"Father!"

"Call me Pa, dammit!" he suddenly roared, and then Jude's knock came on the door.

CHAPTER XVI

JUDE knocked and then opened the door and entered. He was unaware that, as far as the girl was concerned, he had just committed an unpardonable sin. She had sent Jessie to open the door for him. Jude said, "Howdy," to the Negro woman in his soft voice and looked through the arch.

"Come in, Jude," Travers called.

Jude went over to where the two men were working over the plans. He nodded to Mrs. Travers. "How are you, Ma'm? Hope you had a nice trip home."

The girl he nodded at, but did not speak. She was a lovely thing with her russet colored hair and blue eyes, but he had sensed in her impatient pacing in the hotel in Abilene, in her refusal to come home with the outfit, that she was spoiled to the point of arrogance. He was taking a more decided dislike toward her every time he saw her.

The ranchman twisted around in his chair. "Jude, these plans are for a new house we're going to build over there a hundred yards from here."

"Two hundred, father," his daughter put in. "I want to choose the location myself."

Her father ignored that one. He said to Jude, "So, son, tomorrow morning I want you and Pokey to hitch up the chuckwagon and go to Alden. I'll meet you in town. I'm going to buy two new freight wagons and start hauling supplies right away. Col—Peanut here is going to be in charge of the building. You'll be in charge of the freighters. Peanut'll tell you what to buy. What we can't get in town we'll order."

"All right," Jude answered. "Anything else?"

"That's all for the present. If you and the other freighter can get a couple of good helpers—and I'll fire any man who won't work—you ought to be able to make one round trip a day. I want you to make it, come hell or high water. We'll have a fall roundup on our hands pretty soon and I'll need every puncher I can get hold of."

"All right," Jude said.

The girl's eyes were glinting. "Mr Gordon," she said icily, "it would be a little more mark of respect to address the owner as 'sir' or 'Mr. Travers.' And, while we're on the subject, you'll address me as 'Miss Travers.' "

"I'm not aiming to address you at all. I'm just aiming to keep out of your way," was the quiet reply.

Travers exploded with a roar of laughter. "Haw-haw-haw!" he bellowed. "That's one time you got what was comin' to you, 'Miss Travers.' You stick around this ranch long enough, young lady, and we'll soon get yore head out of the clouds and down where it belongs. All right, Jude, you tell Pokey—and you keep him sober in town."

Jude went back outside into the darkness. The rest of the outfit was strolling contentedly back toward the bunkhouse. Jude headed for the dugout and descended the steps into its cool, comfortable interior. Pokey and the other cook were busy clearing dishes.

"What the old man have to say?" Pokey inquired.

Jude told him and the cook whistled. "Trewww! A new house, huh? Dawg-gone but things will start hummin' around heah now, what with the roundup comin' on purty soon. I reckon we'll have to set up a couple of bunk tents to house the extra hands and maybe a cook tent too. Ike, looks like we got our work cut out fer the next couple of months or longer. Jude, this is Ike."

"Hello, matey," Ike said, expending an arm tattooed all the way to the elbow.

Pokey caught Jude's questioning look. "Ike's a sailor," he explained. "He was in the Northern navy during the war. Took over for me when we went north with the herd. Got a parrot that can cuss as loud as Cic can grumble over chuck. Allus heard these sailors carried a parrot on their shoulders but never took much stock in sich things til Ike showed up. What in tarnation fer anyhow?"

"Gets lonesome aboard ship and you git tired talkin' to the rest of the bilge they call a crew. That's a fact, and you can lay to that." And to Jude: "Come over to my shack sometime, mate, and meet Admiral Big Bottom. I named him after a swab I served under on a mud scow they called a fightin' ship. The Admiral likes whiskey."

"Hell, who don't?" snorted Pokey, and cocked an inquiring eye at the man from the sea. "The Admiral—er—wouldn't have a' extra quart he could spare right handy, now would he?"

Ike glared at his co-worker. "I catch you sniffing around the Admiral's likker supply and I'll bend a Marlin spike over your bald noggin. That's a fact, mate, and you can lay to that."

Pokey promptly registered indignation. "Yas?" he sneered. "Well, just don't fergit that Jude an' me are goin' to town tomorror an' we knows who are friends are, don't we, Jude?"

"The old man said to keep you sober. Here, I'll give you a hand with the dishes. Haven't got anything else to do anyhow."

He still felt out of place because of the nine or ten men who were strangers to him. He was remembering that first night at the chuckwagon when, for the only time in his life, he had become panicky and bolted. Thought of that made him smile. He had changed much in a matter of weeks. His whole world had changed, his perspective broadening out by leaps and bounds to new horizons.

HE ROLLED up his sleeves and got busy. They washed the dishes, dried them, and put them back on the two long tables, ready for breakfast next morning. While Pokey sliced bacon the ex-sailor chopped wood and filled the wood box back of the huge stove and then prepared kindling.

When they closed the door of the dining dugout all was in readiness for the next morning.

"Like to keep things shipshape, matey," Ike explained as the three of them strolled through the night toward the outlines of a low shack not far from the bunkhouse. As cook, it was Pokey's prerogative to live by himself, not only because of his position but because the rest of the outfit didn't want him disturbing their sleep when he rose an hour earlier.

They stepped into the doorway and sound came from within.

"Bilge water!" squawked a voice from the corner. It was hoarse, raucous, and a little disgusted.

"Ahoy, Admiral," Ike greeted, lighting a match.

"Ahoy—(squawk) the bos'n, the bos'n —(squawk) man overboard!"

Admiral Big Bottom worked his way along the perch in the corner, ruffled his green feathers, and glared at them from a pair of evil, beady eyes.

Ike lit the lamp and Jude looked about the room. It had two bunks, a table and chairs, an iron bound chest in a corner. Ike went over and extended a forefinger. The Admiral looked at it as though tempted to take it off with that wicked looking beak that could crack a pecan, and condescended to extend a horny claw. He worked his way along the wrist and arm and then, using beak and claw, climbed to the cook's shoulder.

Ike went to the iron bound chest in the corner, took a key from his pocket, and unlocked the big padlock. He brought out a quart bottle half empty and a tiny tin cup.

"Bilge water!" squawked the Admiral.

"The hell it is," Ike snorted. "It's the best grog they had in town and you know it, you galley scum."

"How old is he?" Jude asked curiously.

"The swab I bought him from said he thought about forty or fifty. But I'll bet the Admiral's a good seventy. That's a fact, mate, and you can lay to that."

He came back and put the bottle and

cup on the table and Admiral Big Bottom worked his way down the sleeve again. Ike uncorked and poured, adding in a touch of water. The parrot went after it greedily. Presently the cup finished rattling. It was empty. He went back to Ike's shoulder and ruffled his feathers. Ike poured the three of them drinks and then took the bird back to his perch. He ruffled his feathers and stood on one foot.

"An' we threw the bloomin' bos'n in the ocean," he croaked.

Jude remained with the cooks for an hour or so while Ike related strange tails of sea battles and pirates that might have been true and might have been mostly fiction. Pokey yawned and Jude rose to go. From now on, he knew, he'd need all the sleep he could get.

"I'll get the team out as soon as you're through in the morning," he said. "I'll drive over and unload. Where'll we put the stuff from the wagon?"

"In the storehouse. Any of the boys'll show you where it is." He looked at Ike and licked his lips. "I—uh—seein' as how me an' Jude'll be bringin' a little somethin' back from town tomorrer evenin', maybe we could have another bit before we—"

"Go to hell!" screeched Admiral Big Bottom, and Jude went out into the pitch darkness laughing harder than he had laughed in months.

He looked up at the stars and suddenly he was happier than he had been in his life. He pulled in a lungful of the clean, cool air, and the thought came to him that Cic's remarks about Texas might not be so far from the truth after all. It was big, it was raw and lusty, and it hadn't suffered the ravages of war. There was room for expansion here if a man saved his money.

Jude went to sleep that first night on the T4, owning the biggest ranch in Texas.

THE T4 came alive before daybreak the next morning, the men scrambling out in answer to Ike's stentorian roar through the bunkhouse doorway. They ate bacon, stacks of big flapjacks made from sourdough batter, syrup, washed down by steaming cups of black coffee. Jude got his saddle and bridle off the corral fence and carried them to a long, low shed with two poled racks extending the length. This was the saddle shed, where during the night the men's riding equipment was protected from the elements. He slung it over the rack and went out to hook up. The corral was alive with nearly twenty men roping and saddling from the remuda that Bugger had brought in. Bugger would eat breakfast, sleep most of the day in his bunk rigged up in a lean-to back of the blacksmith shop, and then hang around the kitchen to bedevil Jessie until supper time.

Shelby seemed to be everywhere, handing out orders for the day. Travers showed up as Jude came out of the corral with two bridled horses and began harnessing.

"Peanut made up a list of what we'll need first, Jude," he said. "Mostly mortar for the foundation. We'll haul the rock from the foot of Bald Knob. I'm going in town in the buggy to see about some more men and I'll run into you in there. Get loaded as soon as you can and keep Pokey out of the saloons."

Jude nodded, fastening on horse collars. He finished the four, found out where the storehouse was, and unloaded. By the time he finished and hauled up before the dugout door Pokey was ready. They removed the tarp and staves that covered the bed and rattled off down past the ranchhouse. The road angled north and west, dropping in a gentle incline across the flat to a big wash a half mile below. Wheels crunched into damp ruts as they worked across. Pokey pointed south to where, a half mile away, stood a forest of trees of a kind Jude had never seen before.

"See them? That's why Travers built the ranch here. Them's Wild China. They make the toughest pole corrals a man ever built. Ain't no steer ever lived can crack through one of them pole corrals, and thet wood'll last fer years."

The road wound on, a little more to the west, and they skirted the south side of Bald Knob's tapered butte where large red stones had broken off and come tumbling down to lie in easily accessible piles. Jude made a mental note that if he was to be head freighter, then the other man was going to haul those stones. They passed through a two mile forest of green mesquites, clusters of the long yellow beans brushing at the sides of the wagon. Jude hooked one and chewed absently on it.

"Apaches down in Arizony use 'em fer food," Pokey explained. "They're good cow food too except when they're et too green.

Then they give 'em a bad case of the scours. That's the only time I ever saw a critter change color. She gits all green on the hind legs."

Alden came in sight, some fourteen miles from ranch. It's scattered buildings were sprawled on a gently sloping knoll, bare of trees. It was a much larger place than Jude had imagined. Being the only town within sixty miles, it drew trade from every rancher and nester in the country.

Harness rattled from behind the plodding team and Jude looked back. Travers swerved around them behind a span of trotting blacks, his daughter beside him. Jude tipped his hat, ignoring the cold look she gave him. The buggy grew smaller on the rutted road ahead. Pokey spat over the front wheel and wiped his "splay puss' mustache.

"She used to be a nice younker around the ranch. Regular tomboy, all over the place. Ride like a man and a dinger at ropin' a calf. But not anymore. Too many hifalutin' idees she got in thet fancy school they sent her to. But I reckon she'll git back, give her time."

"I don't like her," Jude said. "All I want to do is keep out of her way."

Pokey cackled. "Then you're sure different from most of these other cow hands. They go outa their way to git a chance to tip their hats an' say, 'Howdy, ma'm.' Little good it'll do 'em. Bet yu a bottle of whiskey thet when we git thet big house finished she'll be givin' parties an' hirin' maids an' servin' tea." He wrinkled up his nose at the last thought. "Well, I guess Travers can afford it now. He can easy put three thousand up the trail to Abilene every year. Few more years of thet an' he'll be worth a million."

He changed the subject, pointing toward a jumble of red sand stones in the square. "See thet? It's a new courthouse goin' up. Two story an' even a cupola. People got together last year an' voted ninety thousand dollar bonds fer it an' the new jail. We elected our first sheriff last year. Jim Underhill. Good man."

They were entering town and Jude didn't answer. He was staring at a man and women who had stood on the porch of the general store and stage station waiting for their luggage to be tossed down.

Blackie had come back and he had brought Edwina with him.

CHAPTER XVII

POKEY cracked the four into a trot. They rattled westward along what soon would be the south side of the square, past the workmen toiling away at the red sandstones. The walls were up about four feet. The town was a lot larger than even Jude's first estimation, close to a thousand, he guessed. At present the main business section lay on the west side of the square, running north and south, and most prominent among the buildings was the huge general store.

Pokey swung on down the gentle roll, cut to the right past a small hotel, and came up in back of the store, where a giant wagon yard sprawled over three acres of land, surrounded by a high fence. Inside the fence were new wagons and buggies of every description, and a lot of farm implements bought for the nesters but which appeared to have been sitting there in the sun and rain for quite some time.

Jude thought of the NP men. Small wonder they didn't farm. Why sweat a man's insides out plodding along back of a plow when one stolen calf, in three years, would be worth quite a pile of hard money. Multiply that by fifty head, feed what you could on your land and hide the rest in the bad country, and it beat farming.

"Whoa, blast you. Whoa, Maud!" Pokey bawled, and hauled up hard on the four lines directly at the double back doors of the store. The hub wheels hit hard against the loading platform and Pokey wrapped the lines around the set brake handle. He displayed remarkable agility in going over to the hub high platform and turned as Jude followed.

"I saw the old man's buggy out front of the store," he said in all the maner of a conspirator. "Him and Nellie are in there talkin' to Sol Martin. Sol's a Jew an' a danged fine man. Anytime the local gamblers get hit hard they come to Sol. I've seen him hand out four thousand in gold with no note signed. An' when they bring it back he won't take any interest. As long as he's got stuff on the shelves people who ain't got money can get it on credit. He don't lose any either—not even from them cow thievin' nesters. But never mind that. You can see the old man in there. Now, Jude, right next door is the back end of a saloon an' yu and me can sorta slip in there an' pick up a drink an' get a quart. I promised Ike, yu know. After all," he added defensively, "a man has to keep his word out in this country an' I owe the Admiral a few drinks, which I can take back to him—"

"I'll get the quart," Jude cut in. "I'll hide it under the seat and it'll stay there until we get out of town on the way back."

"But that'll be two or three *hours,*" Pokey almost wailed.

"I know. But the old man said no saloons, Pokey," Jude smiled and clapped him on the shoulder.

Pokey went snorting into the back of the store and Jude dropped down the four steps at the end of the loading platform. He opened the rear door of the saloon and went in, had a drink, paid for the quart, and came back the same way. He disposed of the liquor, grinning a little as he hid it beneath the loading platform. Then he went inside.

At the northwest corner of the building Sol Martin had his office. It consisted of a fifteen foot square area surrounded by a picket fence with a swinging gate. Inside was a desk, a huge iron safe six feet high and resting on castors, filing cabinets, and three chairs built from willow wood and covered with iron hard, dried cowhide.

Sol and Travers were sitting inside, the merchant going over his account books. Nearby stood Nell Travers, examining a bolt of goods being unrolled on the counter by a woman clerk. The merchant was about sixty, with a clean shaven, slightly red face topped by the only pair of square spectacles Jude ever saw.

"I got it at eight thousand, seven hundred, forty-one dollars, and eighty-six cents, Harry," Jude heard him say. "Does that check with your figures?"

"You know dam' well, Sol, that I never keep any figures," the T4 owner replied. "Too much trouble, except in a tally book. Yourn are good enough for me."

"That includes the six hundred cash you wanted for Nellie," Sol added, and Jude forced a grin as he looked at the girl. She might be "hifalutin' " now but a lot of her schooling had come from money borrowed from Sol Martin's big safe.

"That include the interest on the loan?" Travers asked.

"I'm a merchant, not a money lender, Harry. If I've got it—and there have been times when I didn't—you boys can get it. There have been times when I had to send my son with signed notes to pay for what my string of freighters brought back, but somehow we've all managed to pull through. And now this new railroad in Abilene, with the east crying for Texas beef. I see good times ahead for a few years."

"So do I. Lordy, the prices they ain't paying in Abilene! Nute said three groups of buyers came loping out to start bidding against each other."

The merchant leaned back in his chair and pushed the square, old fashioned spectacles up into his shock of hair. He nodded, smiling genially

"That's what makes good business, Harry. Bidding."

"That's why I want to do some more before the bidding starts, Sol. This new house is costing plenty, but I'll still have some left. I might need more."

"So?"

"Hensen and his wife want to sell out over on Duck Creek. He told me so before I left with the herd. My north boundary meets his south boundary, and we've never found it necessary to keep any line riders between us. When my boys in the line camp see any of his stuff they throw it back north. His does the same with my T4 brand. He's running about a thousand head now, but says his wife an' him are getting old and wants to get out. Claims it's too late for him to start driving up the trail to Kansas. He's cattle poor and the damned nesters are stealing him dry. I can get the outfit pretty cheap. I might need some more cash." Significantly.

JUDE pretended to be examining a group of bridles hanging from a rack, the raw, yellow leather feeling good to his touch. This was the kind of thing he wanted to learn. He was listening for facts and figures. At the counter Nell said, "I'll take the whole bolt. My father will pay for it. Now let me look at that one over there. I want something to make suitable window curtains for the house. It looks so bare."

"You can get it, if you need it," Sol Martin said. "But don't spread out too thin, Harry. I made that mistake once. You see, I'm an immigrant from Europe and Martin isn't my name. I changed it to Martin because nobody in New York except the immigrants could pronounce it. I saved, slaved, started small, and grew. I grew too far and had to start all over again. I got a good chance to sell out and kept coming west, trading as me and mother came. I made money and I had confidence in the future of this country. But this Hensen deal looks good. He's a good man. Buy and I'll back you all I can, if you need it."

Travers started to reply but Jude didn't hear the answer. For at that moment a pair of soft hands slid around from behind and covered his eyes and he felt the imprint of a kiss on his cheek. He turned.

She took his cheeks between his hands and kissed him squarely on the lips.

"Jude!" Edwina exclaimed delightedly. "You gun throwing cowboy."

Blackie came forward, grinning, hand extended. They shook, Jude aware that Nell Travers' eyes were open in astonishment. Just what other expression might have been on her face, or what thoughts were in her mind, he didn't bother himself with. He felt better now.

"Hello, Jude," Blackie grinned. "We finally got here. Rode all night on the stage to make the last lap. How's things on the ranch?"

"All right, I guess. We got back fine. No trouble except the usual amount of rain and wind. How's Angelica?"

Edwina laughed and so did Blackie. He was wearing a new suit, but the two heavy pistols showed their bulge beneath the coat.

"She sends her regards and threatens to follow us out here," Edwina smiled. "I think you kind of took her heart away from her, Jude. Shame on you, you handsome cowboy."

This hadn't escaped Nell either. Blackie went over, doffing his new hat, and spoke to her. A man strolled casually by, toward the back door, and Jude said to Edwina, "Excuse me."

He went out the back door. Pokey was fumbling frantically beneath the wagon seat. He turned, his face growing red.

"I—uh—think I lost my jackknife," he mumbled. "Some of the boys is whittlin' out on the front porch an' I sorta couldn't find it."

"Take mine." Jude brought out the new one he'd bought in Abilene. "It's razor sharp."

Pokey glared, slammed the knife into his pocket, and stalked indignantly back into the store, head held high. Jude followed him inside.

Travers came out, after settling up with Sol Martin, and they got busy loading the wagon with two new tents for the extra men, plus the other things Peanut had required. Travers disappeared, ostensibly to hunt up some men. Two of Sol's help hooked onto the two huge new freight wagons and rolled them up near the big gate and began greasing the axles. They stood high off the ground with broad iron tires.

"We'll need 'em," the sweating Pokey grunted, heaving at a sack. "Just you wait until we git caught in a downpour. Them wheels'll go clean to the hubs. I know. Yu got yu're job cut out fer yu, Jude."

Noon came. They broke off long enough to eat. By that time two teams of four each, bought from the livery and complete with harness, had been hooked to the two new wagons and had disappeared toward the lumber yard. At one o'clock the loading was done. Jude wiped the sweat from his face and straightened. He removed the grain nose bags from the horses' heads, bent and retrieved the bottle beneath the loading platform, and got ready to crawl up for the return trip.

THEN Blackie and a big bluff man of fifty came through the rear door. The man was about fifty or fifty-two and looked like any ordinary cowman except for the star on his shirt front. Jim Underhill, the first sheriff.

They shook hands at Blackie's introduction and Underhill's penetrating but good natured eyes took in Jude, the pistol at his right hip. "So you got Harrison in Abilene?" he commented. "Blackie told me all about it, son. Long as you wait for the other man to shoot first you won't have any trouble with me."

"I don't expect any trouble, " Jude said. "But if it comes I reckon I'll have to judge accordingly."

He looked at Blackie. "You coming back to the ranch with us?"

Blackie grinned shaking his head. "Jim's just offered me a job as deputy sheriff, Jude."

"Taking it?" low voiced.

"You bet I'm taking it. No more getting a shirt torn off by a steer's horn going down in a stampede for Blackie. I'm through with the cow business, Jude. But

I'll be out to get my stuff."

Jude put down his disappointment, hiding it beneath a poker face. He said, "Sounds like a good job. I wish you luck."

And in that moment he knew that his and Blackie's trails had parted. They would see each other at intervals and still be friends. But Blackie was a lawman now and, too, there was Edwina. Jude remembered what his friend had said in the hotel ("I want that.") when he looked at Nell Travers. He wondered if they were married.

Jude stuck out his hand again. "Well, I guess we'd better get going. I'll run into you now and then, I guess."

"Yup, we better get goin'," Pokey put in, his eyes instinctively glancing back of the seat. He crawled up and unwrapped the lines. Blackie stepped forward.

"One word of warning, Jude. The NP outfit with Red Tolliver leading left Abilene the day before Edwina and me took the stage. They'll be in in a few days. Watch your horizons, boy."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE T4—the T was for Travers and the 4 for the four years he had spent in the Civil War—became more of a construction camp than a ranch in the weeks that followed. Fifteen workmen were housed in the two new tents and under Peanut's crisp supervision the big foundation of red sandstone took shape in what looked like irregular squares and the walls began to rise. Jude worked from daylight until dark, making daily trips to Alden, loading and unloading, loading and unloading . . . his life seemed to be made up of nothing else. He ate hungrily at all times and his body, which had been hard enough, took on weight even while it became lean and tough. He saw Blackie nearly every day, his friend now wearing the badge of a deputy sheriff. And from all reports Blackie was making a good one.

He and Edwina were not only openly living together. They shared separate rooms in the two-story hotel on the north east corner of the square. The north side itself housed a line of gambling places and saloons and two restaurants. Jude wore his gun all the time for Red Tolliver was back and Red was openly boasting. In the store silent, surly looking nesters — men who wore plowmen's shoes while in town and then shifted to riding boots—stared hard at him and gave him a wide berth. Jude went his way, wary, quiet, and never turning his back on a man. Reports drifted in that Balckie had laid down the law to Tolliver. And Blackie was a bad man to deal with. Jude heard other reports that Edwina was going to open up a new place, a general gambling hall and saloon, where she would sing. The town was growing, the second story of the courthouse now up and the roof going on. Men were drifting in. You could hear any kind of rumors: that the cowmen over a hundred mile radius were hiring "exterminaters" to take care of rustling nesters: that the nesters were hiring killers to take care of the big owners.

Jude went his way and the building supplies piled higher and higher beside the newly erected structure until there came a day when Peanut said they had about enough.

"Anymore we need can be taken care of without too much trouble, ah reckon, Jude," he said that late afternoon as Jude and his helper finished unloading. "We're startin' the fall roundup next week anyhow an' you'll be needed."

Jude nodded at the little man and watched the helper lead the teams away. He reached up into the big wagon and brought down his .44-40 repeater from the wagon seat. He had carried it with him almost every day since he began hauling. Blackie had said for him to watch his horizons. But Jude had made every effort to keep the weapon hidden. Nobody knew that on those trips the loaded gun lay within reach at all times while Jude's eyes kept a sharp lookout toward every ridge and through every mesquite clump; his helper was a stolid, middle aged Mexican who ate noisily, worked like a giant horse, and told nothing. His only diversion was in teaching Jude Spanish. And Jude himself was not aware of the change that had come over him. He was quiet, seldom speaking unless somebody made a remark to him; he didn't realize how quiet he had become. But the men of the outfit knew. They talked among themselves about the reports drifting around. The Nester Pool had sworn to get this nester kid, and this kid who attended to his own business and kept his eyes and ears open was a dangerous man.

Treat him as one of the outfit but keep out of his way. He'd killed Jim Harrison in Abilene, the story of the fight growing with the telling. It was a legend now throughout that section of the cow country, a vastly exaggerated legend that made Jude silently angry. He wanted to be one of the outfit; learn the cow business, save his money, take part of his pay in cows, perhaps. Get an iron of his own started. That was all he wanted. But Blackie had warned him several more times that Red Tolliver was talking, that killers were being brought in by the nester pool, and Jude had acted accordingly.

One of the men of the outfit innocently started the new flurry. He had discovered, in going after his saddle one morning, that there was a new gun sheath laced into the left fork of Jude's saddle. Jude had taken it in town during one of his freighting trips and had the sheath fitted, the mate to his .44 now in his warbag. That had been one of his own innovations, and he hadn't dreamed of what the repercussions would be. Word had spread like wildfire that the nester kid who had shot and killed Twogun Jim Harrison in Abilene now had a second gun sheath fitted to his saddle.

A two gunman. Look out for this kid just turning nineteen. He was chain lightning, a coiled rattler. Keep out of his way.

Peanut's eyes nodded approval as Jude took down the repeater. "You shuh got a level head on you, son," he said. "Just because ah'm a buildin' man now is no reason why ah don't hear things. They're out to git you, son. Harrison was theah best bet. You eliminated him. They won't fo'get. Keep yo' eyes open, son."

"I'm depending on Blackie, Colonel," Jude smiled, for he and Peanut now were on familiar terms. "I don't want any trouble with anybody. I just don't want to get caught on the short end, that's all."

The other man's stern face relaxed in a smile. "Don't worry, son. You won't. Ah know men."

And that, coming from a man who had been through four years of shot and shell, was something to warm Jude's young heart. He started toward the bunkhouse, carrying rifle and canteen.

"Mr. Gordon," called a commanding feminine voice.

JUDE turned. It was Nell Travers, sitting side saddle and dressed in the latest in riding fashions. Jude had caught occasional glimpses of her during the past weeks while she pored over plans with Peanut and watched the new twelve room house rise. His greetings were always the same: a brief touch of his hand to his hatbrim. That much he owed to any woman, because his mother had taught him so; and Edwina in particular. For Edwina did something to his senses. Sight of her slim figure and golden hair started strange emotions in him that he had never been able to control. She was Blackie's "woman." She was a singer from the dancehalls of Abilene and, therefore, something to be sniffed at by the housewives in Alden. But she was warm and human and friendly where Nell Travers was cold and unfriendly and arrogant.

She was coming up at a jog trot now, reining in beside him, her right leg up around the horn of the side saddle.

"Well," she snapped. "Help me down and take this horse and see that he's unsaddled and rubbed down."

He looked up at her, naively unaware of just what his handsome young face and broad, healthy shoulders were doing to her emotions. Nor would he have cared had he known. She has thought him an ignorant, uneducated young farm hand from the plains of Kansas, working for her father at a thirty dollar a month wage, unused to women, like the rest of the hands on the ranch who went out of their way to lift a hat and say, "Howdy, ma'm." But a golden haired young singer had kissed him tenderly and there had been mention of still another woman; Angelica. He had ignored her, even humiliated her. Now she had taken the offensive.

She was not used to being ignored. Pride and her position as the owner's daughter demanded his subjugation.

He said, gravely, "I'm afraid you've made a mistake, Miss Travers. I'm a freighter, not a cow hand. I'm used to handling a four horse team. Here comes Cic. I'm sure he'll give you a hand. Oh, Cic!"

Cic strolled over.

"Miss Travers needs some help to get down outa that side saddle and have her horse rubbed down."

"Sure," said the amiable Cic, quite unaware of the flame in the young woman's eyes. "Here, Miss," extending cupped hands. "Just put thet foot of yourn in my hand an' I'll help you down an' take care of the hoss."

She slid to the ground without his aid, her eyes blazing at Jude's retreating back with a canteen over one shoulder, a repeating rifle in the other hand, and the heavy pistol at one hip.

"Take this horse," she snapped at the surprised Cic.

"Yes, ma'm. What'll I do with 'im?"

"Cook him for supper!" she cried out angrily and strode toward the house.

"Me," mumbled Cic, quite confused by it all, "I'm just a' ugly cow hand who got a jaw busted by a Union sharpshooter during the war. I don't know what from nothin'. Come on, you 'mount'. You shore ain't a' ordinary cow hoss. No cow hoss would allow sech a rig to be strapped on him without throwin' the owner sky high. A side saddle. Gawdlemighty!"

He led the animal toward the corral and Mike Kessler strolled by. "Look at him," Mike jeered. "The old groom himself."

"Yo're a liar!" Cic snarled at the grinning Mike. "I ain't never been married an' that ain't all—I ain't intendin' to *get* married!"

Mike paced him past the bunkhouse, mincing with a hand on one hip, for the edification of a dozen grinning punchers waiting the supper call. "Rub him down, cowboyyyyyy," Mike directed in a feminine tone of voice. "Be sure and put on his nightgown and don't let him set up in bed and smoke. I shall be away to the hounds in the mawnin'. Hurry, groom."

Cic let go of the reins and bent to the ground. He came up with three rocks in his left hand and began pelting. Mike broke for the protection of the bunkhouse while roars of laughter rolled out. He ducked a final stone that bounced off the wall and turned in the doorway.

"Don't forget, my man," he whooped. "Early in the *mawnin'*. The foxes, you know. They're chasing all the fat off the steers. Tally-ho!"

Cic strode on toward the corrals, his face flaming, swearing silent vengeance on Mike and the other howling punchers. Jude went inside and divested himself of canteen and hat. He placed the .44-40 beneath his bunk.

He was unaware that up on the east porch of the ranchhouse a young woman had witnessed it all, her eyes blazing angrily at the horseplay, and blaming Jude for her "humiliation." She went into the house, snapping at Jessie, and vowing revenge.

THEY rolled out the next morning, early as usual, and this time Jude, wearing his chaps, went beneath the saddle shed and brought out his riding gear, carrying it toward the horse corral. Bugger had just driven them in, swinging down to put the pole gate into place. Jude watched the other riders catch their mounts, holding back because he was unfamiliar with corral procedure. He might get a horse that belonged to another man. When the riders thinned out he took his rope and went in, selecting a blocky looking sorrel with four white feet. The animal was what was known as a "cream sorrel," and it was built for work; a deep barrel, a short body, and sturdy legs.

Mike Kessler, already mounted and awaiting Nute Shelby's orders for the day, looked over at Cic and grinned. Cic said, "Just stand by an' see he don't get hurt."

"Slim" Connors, the bronk stomper of the outfit, twisted his swivel hips up into the saddle and said, "Thet sorrel's a good hoss but hard to handle."

"Let the kid alone," Cic cut in, far more sharply than he usually spoke.

"He's got to learn all by himself," Mike said. "But don't worry—Jude can take care of himself. You boys just help me stand by to haze in case Jude gets into trouble."

The cream sorrel with the four white feet — white sox, they were called — was cagey. Jude eyed another horse, went in with his loop swinging, then spun and caught the ducking sorrel. He drew it up to short length along the rope and put on the bridle, forcing its clenched teeth apart. It stood, half quivering, wary. It sidled a bit as the blanket and then the saddle struck its sleek back. Jude cinched up tight, removed the rope from its neck, coiled it, fastened it on the saddle, and took up the reins.

Bugger stood by the corral gate, grinning a white toothed grin. He knew every horse in the cavvy as well as he knew Jessie. He knew that cream sorrel. Bugger got his hand on the gate, ready to "turn 'im out."

Jude grasped the reins in his left hand and then the left side of the head stall too. He pulled the sorrel's head around hard as his foot found the stirrup and he mounted.

He straightened and let go of the headstall. Then something exploded beneath him and he felt himself sailing through the air. He landed on his left side and rolled over twice.

He got up, grim lipped, and dusted himself off, thankful that he had hit on his left side. A number of men, wearing pistols, had had hips broken by falling on the hard outlines of the gun at a right hip.

Jude strode toward the sorrel. It stood across the corral, facing him, ears pointed and nostrils flaring. He was aware that Cic, Slim, and Mike were watching from the outside of the corral.

"Open that gate, Bugger," Jude called over his shoulder.

He took up the trailing reins and got ready to swing up a second time. The cream sorrel was half crouched, waiting. This time, when Jude hit leather, he hooked his rowels into the cinch to hang on. The sorrel went into action, straight toward the open gate.

"Ride 'im, Jude, ride 'im!" yelled Bugger's encouraging voice. "Fog 'im, boy!"

The sorrel went out into the open, bucking at every jump, twisting his blocky body from side to side. his head down between his legs. He headed straight for the ranchhouse and, right in front of the east porch, went up sunfishing and came down twisting.

He came down alone. Jude struck heavily, almost on his face, and three riders came spurring by hard to haze the sorrel. Cic plunged in, rowelling his horse hard, and grabbed the dangling reins. He came leading the animal back as Jude got up and dusted himself off for the second time. He became aware then that Travers, his wife, and his daughter, were standing on the porch in the morning dawn. The T4 owner still had a breakfast fork in one hand.

Jude found himself looking straight into Nell Travers' triumphant eyes.

"A freighter, you said you were," she laughed softly. "I never thought cowboys told the truth, but I apologize, Mr. Gordon. You told the truth. You're a freighter. You better take off those chaps and go back to hauling lumber."

Travers was more sympathetic. "A horse is easy to handle, son, once he knows who's boss. You just happened to pick a mean one. Nute should have known better."

"He's not mean," Jude said.

HE MOUNTED a third time, right in front of the porch, his face grim with determination. This time he held back on the reins enough to make the sorrel hold up its head a bit, not getting the bit between its teeth. They tore up the ground, the sorrel pitching in a circle until the animal, almost crashing into the side of the dining dugout, finally gave it up. It knew who was boss. Jude reined it over toward the corrals where a silent Nute Shelby had witnessed the whole show. Cic, Mike, and Slim Connors followed, at a lope.

Cic said to Nute, and quite casually, "Where you want me to work today?"

"Take the south boundary over near Double Moutain River. Better get some grub from the cook house. Jude'll go with you. Work everything back this direction. Better start combing the brakes now than at roundup time. Push 'em all back."

They went south in the early morning sun, the two of them side by side. The horizon lay before them, mesquites and gullies and rolling swells of the prairie. They covered ten miles and finally came out on a bluff, looking down at a quarter of a mile expanse of dry sand supporting a thin strip of gyp water three inches deep.

"There's old Double Mountain," Cic said. "She don't look much now but you oughta see her when we get a heavy rain. She comes bustin' down hell bent for election, all muddy and mad, takin' everything hard that gets in her way. That's when some of these damned dirty nesters get in their worst work. They drive a dozen cows with calves right down to the edge of the water and then down the cows with rifles. They float downstream for miles before the water goes down; an' by thet time the thieves have driven the bawlin' calves onto their own places, gotched and branded. We know it's T4 stuff bue we ain't got any way of provin' it."

"Suppose you caught one rebranding or shooting?"

"Bring him in alive, if you can. If you can't bring him in dead. That's why Blackie bought that gun for you. But Jim Underhill is square and if you can prove a clear case of rustlin', there won't be any trouble with the law. Underhill knows what we're up ag'in. He ain't takin' any sides. After all, Travers don't own his ranges anymore than the rest of the cattlemen in

Texas. He just took up and is holdin' on. The nesters have a legal right in here, an' Travers is square enough to admit it. He just don't like for 'em to be stealing him dry all the time. A steer now an' then for beef, sure. But not organized rustlin'."

They rode eastward along the bluff. A mile further on the river made a sharp turn to the right and faded into the distance. Cic reined up and pointed that way.

"Our boundary line ends here, Jude. Over there is nester country. Them river lands and the prairies over there for miles is swarmin' with 'em. We've got line camps all along here—riders on the lookout fer stock that they keep pushin' back. But the cows slip through an' we never see 'em again. Then they make night raids while the line riders are asleep. By the way, Jude, you see thet shack about a mile down the turn of the river—down there among the mesquites an' cottonwoods?"

Jude stood high in the stirrups of the new saddle, gun at his hip and the second one in the saddle sheath on the left fork. He nodded.

"That's Jim Harrison's place," Cic said. "Or, rather, it was," he finished awkwardly. "But . . . come on, we've got work to do."

CHAPTER XIX

THIS was the south boundary of Harry Travers' "holdings" and their job was to round up everything wearing his T4 brand and shove it back north, toward the grounds of the home ranch.

"We've got two line camps along here, spaced ten miles apart," Cic explained to Jude. "Two riders in each camp. They're supposed to patrol the line every day and push back everything they see wearing the boss's brand. One of the camps is about four miles west of here. But I never trusted Ernie Davis an' his pard Frank Jergens any too much. We shoulda run into 'em by now. You can see miles in this country when you get up on a rise, and we ain't seen 'em yet. Ten to one," he added sarcastically, "they're down at one of the stills some of these nesters run, guzzlin' raw corn whiskey an' makin' a deal to let the nesters slip by nights to run off T4 cattle."

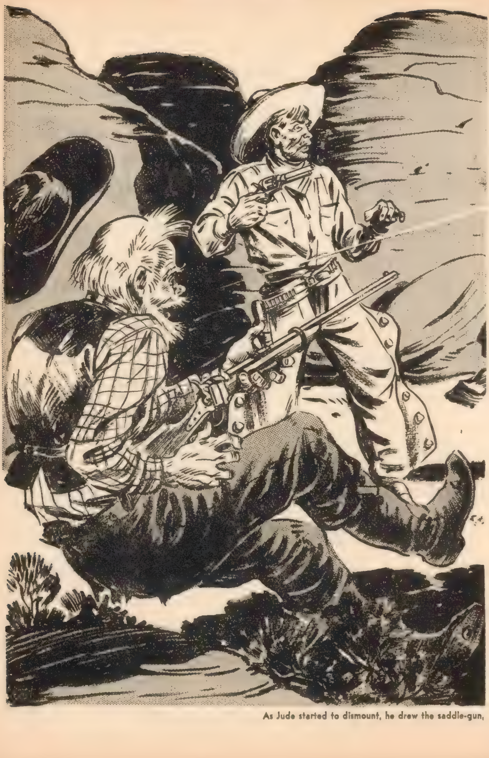
"I thought a rider was supposed to be loyal to his outfit," Jude remarked.

That one brought a hard laugh from the scar faced man riding beside him. "An honest puncher sticks by his outfit, Jude, come the devil and all his angels. He gets forty dollars a month and found, and for that he's supposed to stick by the boss. Most men do. But it's purty easy for a nester rustler to pay off a few dollars extra, or even split the profits, to have line riders workin' hand an' glove with them. There's some as'll even give the rustlers a hand. But I don't know fer sure, I'm only guessin'. I'm just telling you these things because you're out to make a puncher and you got to learn. But, hell—come on, look what I see down there."

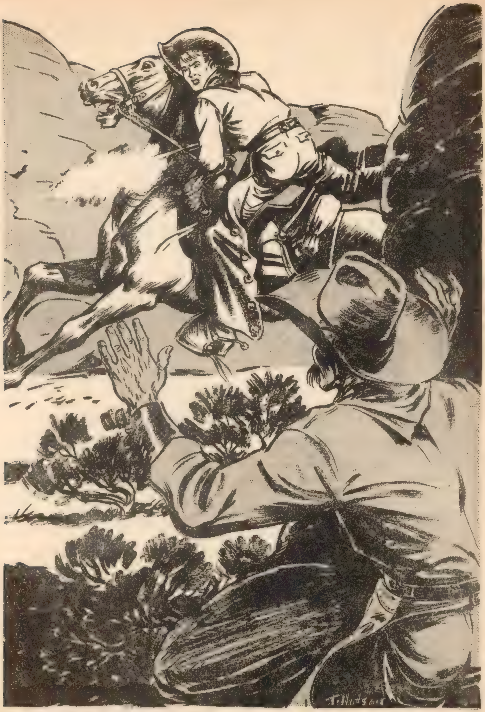
What he saw was about thirty head of cattle grazing contentedly down in a draw below them. They dropped down a sharp, winding cow trail and the wild cattle threw up their heads and began to trot off. The two riders followed them for a mile north and then wheeled back south again, toward the line. They worked on west, picking up scattered stuff here and there. By now they were a mile apart. About then Jude spotted an old bull with wide spreading horns, alone on a ridge among the mesquites. He was at least seven or eight years old and wore no brand.

One of the wary old brush boys that knew every foot of the country and had slipped through the roundups. Cic had told him about these. Down in south Texas, near the coast, they were known as moss horns because they hid out in the timber and soon collected a growth of moss on their heads. Hence any old such bull as the one he now saw was known as a moss horn.

Jude spurred the blocky sorrel up over the ridge and the bull wheeled, disappearing into the mesquites. Jude went after him. He certainly had no intention of trying to rope and gotch *that* animal. He'd have tried to stop a locomotive first. But his orders had been to drive everything northward and Jude obeyed. The sorrel hunched into a run and they went smashing down through the mesquites, hard after the pumping haunches of the disappearing bull, its tail up over its back. Thorny limbs struck at his chaps and body and he threw up an arm now and then to protect his face. The bull was heading straight south, shooting for the bluffs and the underbrush of the river below. Jude worked dull rowels into the sorrel's pumping sides and the animal that had thrown him twice proved its worth in a final burst of stamina



As Jude started to dismount, he drew the saddle-gun,



whipped it across his body and started to pour lead that turned the fleeing longhorn and sent it crashing back to the north.

Jude kept after him hard, not giving him any chance to turn back. But he made the mistake of crowding the tiring animal too close. The next thing he knew two long horns were facing him at bay.

It was the sorrel that saved them both. It lunged to one side in time for one of the needle tipped horns to miss its flanks by inches. Jude sat there in the saddle astride the heaving horse and watched the bull's lean rump disappear.. . . south to its sanctuary along the river.

Lesson number one. Don't crowd a critter too far and put it on the prod.

He was learning fast.

He reined over and began jogging west again, wondering what had happened to Cic. Now and then he stopped to listen for the sounds of the other man working cattle out of the brush, but he heard nothing. Jude continued on along the line, dropping in and out of gullies that led toward the river. In one of these, choked with mesquites, he rode around a clump and saw Mike.

He saw the barrel of the rifle too. It was lined squarely at his chest from a distance of not more than fifteen feet.

Cic stood off to one side. His gunbelt was on the ground. There were two other men, including the man with the rifle. He was bearded, unwashed, and ill dressed. He wore shoes instead of boots.

"All right, puncher," he snarled, baring yellow teeth between the hair on his brutal face. "Reach one han' down cautious like an' unbuckle thet gunbelt an' let it drop to the ground. You make one other move an' I'll bore you with this Sharps."

Cic's voice cut in calmly, "You'd better do what he says, Jude. He was a good friend of Jim Harrison an' near as mean. This other coyote is Frank Jergens, who was supposed to be ridin' line instead of helpin' slip them three cows an' calves across the river."

Jude looked at the renegade T4 puncher. He was ferret-toothed, shifty-eyed, a hard grinning youth with a spine that curved into sloping shoulders. His gun was covering Cic.

"Move!" snarled the bearded nester with the Sharps.

Jude had come up with his left side to them. He reached with his right hand and unbuckled his gunbelt. It thudded to the ground.

"Now git down," ordered the man with the rifle. "So yu're the smart younker who killed Jim Harrison, eh?" he sneered. "Well, yu won't be killin' anymore nesters. It's out fer yu."

JUDE leaned over and half lifted his leg as though to dismount, his hand unfastened the snap that held the sheath gun in place. Then he snatched it in a lightning move and shot across the neck of the sorrel. He killed the man with the Sharps but the sorrel plunged and, with one leg out of the saddle, Jude hit the ground.

Jergens had spun, firing, his slow mentality making him panicky. Two shots struck the ground by Jude before he got lined. Then he shot Frank Jergens three times. The puncher went down in a crumpled heap. His legs began to thresh, the spur rowels making rattling sounds. Jude had snapped up, unaware that to Cic's amazed eyes he was a flaming faced bundle of death, tawny as a puma and as chain lightning fast; deadly as a striking rattlesnake.

Jergens was still threshing around on his back, leaving red smears on the ground. Blood was coming out of his mouth and he was making horrible, choking sounds. Presently he shuddered and lay still while a flaming faced Jude Gordon stood like a stone statue, the long barrelled six shooter still gripped in his hand. Then he lifted his face and spoke in a voice that Cic would never forget.

"I'm sorry I got separated from you, Cic. It was my fault, chasin' that moss horn bull. You all right?"

Cic blew a *whoosh* out of his lungs. "I'm all right. They got the drop on me. I was follerin' Tabor—thet's thet nester there—drivin' three cows an' calves toward the river, sneakin' up to ketch him red handed. Then Frank slipped up on *me* an' got the drop from behind. They were gettin' ready to make a cold-blooded job of it when we heard the sorrel."

He bent and picked up his gunbelt, strapping it on again. He rolled a cigarette and his fingers were trembling. Jude went to the sorrel some thirty yards away and led the sweat covered animal back. It had been a hard run after that bull.

Cic said, to cover his shakiness, "You got to learn how to work a cow horse, Jude. He's like a man. He can sprint so far an' then he's got to be given a chance to blow an' get the trembles outa his legs."

Jude had shoved the death dealing weapon back into the sheath and buckled the strap. He had shot with his left hand, thankful that he had done quite a lot of practicing on the way down from Abilene. He might not have bothered had it not been for the fact that he remembered how Blackie had handled so dexteriously a gun in his left hand. His and Blackie's trails had more or less parted, but Blackie was still his idol. So Jude had made excuses to go off into distant gullies, allowing the outfit to go on ahead; and when they were out of the sound of gunfire, the walls of a gully muffling the shots, he had pounded away with first one hand and then the other.

But he knew that that first shot across the sorrel's neck, the shot that had killed Tabor the nester rustler, was more luck than anything else.

"What de we do now?" he asked Cic.

"Leave 'em lay an' get back to the ranch. I've had enough work to last me fer today. Somebody'll have to go in town an' bring out the sheriff. "But," he added, "you got nothin' to worry about. It was them or us."

"I could drift, I reckon. Plenty of room for a man over in Arizona Territory."

"You won't drift. There's no reason to. Jim don't like this rustlin' anymore than we do. You've just saved him some extra work an' the T4 the Lord knows how many head. Come on."

They swung up. The ride back northward toward the ranch was done mostly in silence. It was just before noon when they came in and unsaddled. Jude took the death dealing weapon out of its sheath on the left fork of the saddle and went to the bunkhouse. He began cleaning it, in silence.

It was, he thought, a pretty tough thing for a man to have to kill two other men on his nineteenth birthday. He worked at the gun, still a little shaken by it all.

CIC had walked on over to the ranchhouse. Two horses were at the hitch rail by the east porch. Cic went in without knocking. He took off his hat and strode into the dining room, ignoring Nell Travers' disapproving eyes. The family was having an early dinner and Nute Shelby was eating with them because the T4 owner wanted to discuss plans for the coming fall roundup.

Shelby looked up from his plate.

"You're back early," he commented, a little sharply.

"I got reason to be back early," the scar faced puncher said. "Mind if I have a cup of coffee? I need it. What I need is a drink of the Admiral's whiskey. There was hell on the south line this morning."

Travers had nodded toward a chair and then at Jessie, bustling around the table. He looked at Cic.

"What?"

"Tabor an' Frank Jergens are dead. They're down in a gully close to the river."

"You kill them?"

Cic shook his head. "Jude shot the both of them dead from thet saddle gun sheath of his. He saved my life," he added simply.

They were staring at him. Nell Travers' eyes were a little wide.

"How come?" demanded Shelby. "What did Jergens have to do with it?"

"Plenty. He's in with the nesters. Me an' Jude hit the south line this mornin' an' started workin' the stuff back. Thet kid took to the brush like an old time brush popper. Thet boy's got the making of a cow hand—an' mebbe a little more. I was up on a ridge watching him when he went in after an old mossy. I shoulda warned him but figgered to let him learn the hard way. It was Old Brindle himself," he finished, grinning.

They had discovered Old Brindle the first time some three years before, one of the biggest bulls any of them ever had seen. He was then four years old and undisputed king of his domain. Jude hadn't been the first puncher who had tried to get him into the roundup herd.

"It was the sorrel saved him," Cic went on. "Thanks, Jessie," to the Negro woman. He put the cup of coffee on the table. "That's one reason I didn't warn him about thet sorrel this mornin'. I figgered if he could ride him he'd have a good cow horse under him, in case he got in trouble. So Old Brindle went back down through the brush with his tail over his back, heading toward the underbrush along the river, an' I went on shoving back more stuff. I kept lookin' for Jergens an' Davis. I never liked either one of 'em an' allus figgered you made a mistake in putting them on a line camp job. Anyhow, we didn't see hide nor hair of 'em until I spotted Tabor down a draw. He was drivin' three cows with unbranded calves that slipped through the spring roundup toward the river."

"Rustling?" demanded Travers sharply.

"In plain daylight," nodded Cic, sipping at the black coffee. "But I wanted to be sure. So I follered him through the brush until he dropped 'em down a draw almost on the edge of the river. Next thing I knowed Jergens was close up behind me with his gun out, covering me. He was grinning like a turkey gobbler."

He took another sip at the steaming coffee. They knew there was little use in trying to rush him. Cic would tell the story in his own way and take his time. They listened, the girl's eyes riveted upon his badly scarred face. Cic put the cup down on the table.

He continued: "I don't know how he slipped up on me thataway; maybe because I was so busy watching Tabor. But he had the drop on me, thet gun levelled right at my belly an' not twenty feet separating us. I didn't have a chance. 'Sneakin' around pryin', eh?' he says with a nasty grin I didn't like. 'Well, just drop thet gunbelt and don't make any funny moves.' I dropped it. He was ready to shoot. Then he bellers for Tabor, who's up on the ridge. I'd been sneakin' along down in the draw. Tabor come down, an' I never seen a meaner lookin' man than he was, what with thet beard an 'thet big rifle he was carryin'. It was outs for me an' I knew it. Then just about thet time Jude come over the ridge. I had to stand there while he come ridin' right around a mesquite clump plumb into the muzzle of Tabor's Sharps. I wanted to holler out an' warn him but Jergens had thet gun lined at my belly an' was warnin' *me* to keep quiet. So Jude come up an' Tabor covered him with the Sharps, orderin' him to drop his gun belt."

HE PAUSED again, long enough to take another swallow of the now cooling coffee. "I never seen anybody as cool as thet kid was. When Tabor told him to drop thet belt of his'n he done it without a word. Then he started to swing down on the off side of his hoss. Right then plain and fancy hell broke loose. I've never seen anybody move as fast. His right leg was up outa the stirrup when he jerked thet gun outa the saddle sheath on the left side an' let drive across the neck of the sorrel! Just one shot an' he got thet rustlin' nester plumb center! The sorrel bolted an' threw him to the ground. He come up firin'. Jergens shot twice at him before Jude, layin' on the ground, got goin'. He just layed there on the ground pumpin' 'em sorta slow an' easy an' cool into Frank. Then he got up an you'd never imagined what he said."

"No telling," Travers said.

"He said, cool an' as calm as could be, 'I'm sorry I got separated from you, Cic. It was my fault, chasin' thet moss horn bull.' Just like thet!"

"Where's Jude now?' Shelby cut in.

"Down at the bunkhouse. He's half way figgerin' on driftin'."

Travers rose, pushing back from his half finished meal. "Drift, hell," he said. "That kid's done this ranch more good since the night Blackie brought him into camp up in Kansas than any dozen punchers on the outfit. Harrison was bad enough, heading the nesters like he did, though Blackie would have killed him in time. But Tabor was one of the worst. He was a murderin' Missouri guerilla before he came out here two year ago and started rustling. Many's the time I've stood in Sol's store an' watched him sneering at me through that dirty beard. He was as mean as they come."

"I know it," Cic agreed. "Frank Jergens wouldn't have the nerve to do a cold blooded job like they were goin' to do on me. Tabor was just gettin' ready to let me have it plumb center with that Sharps when Jude showed up."

"Where are you going?" asked Mrs. Tabor.

"Down there. You didn't see Davis?" he asked Cic.

"Nope. He's either in camp or down along the river at one of the whiskey stills, guzzlin' liquor with the nesters. Him an' Frank were cronies."

"He can guzzle some more of it," snapped out the T4 owner. "I'm going down there and kick him off the T4 range."

"If he heard them shots an' come down to investigate," Cic grinned with grim humor, "I got a hunch you won't have to kick him off. Ten to one he's already drifted."

Shelby had pushed back his chair and

come to his feet. He looked at Travers. "I'll go down with you and we'll wait for the sheriff. Cic, the first one of the boys comes in you tell him to eat in a hurry, saddle a good horse, and burn the breeze for the sheriff's office. Tell him to come on out here right away."

"And," Travers put in, "you tell him that hed better act accordingly or I'll swing every vote against him in the next election. We've had a showdown coming with these rustling nesters for a long time. I don't mind any man butchering one of my beeves to get something to eat for his wife and kids until the crops bring in a little money. But, by God, I won't be stole dry by anybody!"

The three men went out. Slim Connors was down in the corral. He had just worked a lathered young gelding in through the gate and was swivelling down. He'd held its head up, not letting it buck, but when it wanted to run he'd let it run.

Travers went down to the corral, accompanied by the two other men. Connors was unsaddling, talking to the horse; low and soothing.

"Easy now, boy. Yuh've had a good run an' got the kinks outa yore system an' yuh feel a lot better. Yuh an' me are friends. We both got a job to do. Mine's teachin' yuh not to turn mean. Yourn's to learn the cow business. Now yuh go over there in that nice powdered horse dung in the sun an' have yoreself a good roll. Work that dry stuff into yore hide an' then git up an' shake it off. It'll dry up the sweat."

HE STROKED the sweat drenched gelding along the shoulder and then slipped off the bridle. The dun gelding might have understood him for all its actions. It promptly ambled across the corral, buckled its knees and went down. It's sleek, soft belly went up against the sun as it enjoyed a glorious roll in the dung, beaten to powder by a thousand churning hoofs. It worked its neck along the ground, switched over twice, and the bronk stomper looked over at Travers and grinned.

"They say any hoss that rolls over three times is a good 'un," he chuckled. "That makes him one of the best. Give him a little education cutting out steers in the fall roundup an' he'll be ready for the trail to Abilene next spring.'

"Slim," ordered Travers, "go over and grab a bite to eat quick as you can. I want you to saddle a fresh horse and burn the breeze for the sheriff in Alden. Tell Jim I said get out here right away."

Connors paused, in the act of closing the corral gate. "What's up?" he queried.

"Plenty," snapped the T4 owner. "Jude killed Frank Jergens and that damned Tabor on the south line this morning. Caught 'em red handed."

"Gawdlemighty! That quiet nester kid. I don't need anything to eat. I'll eat in town. I'm practically half way there already, boss."

He grabbed up bridle and saddle and headed for the next corral.

CHAPTER XX

HE WAS out in a matter of minutes, burning the breeze down across the flats. He disappeared into the mesquites across the gully, working his fresh mount with sure, skilled knowledge to get the utmost out of it on the fourteen mile run. He was taking the short cut, not following the road.

He drove into town and, being a bronk stomper, his mount came first. He let it drink about half what it wanted at the town horse trough, took it over back of Sol's store, rubbed it down, and then walked it in a circle for fifteen minutes to let it cool off. He loosened the cinch, tied it at the corner of the wagon yard back of the store, and went in through the back. Sol was talking with a man when Slim came in; a nester.

Sol never took part in any discussions concerning the feeling between the rustling nesters and the cowmen. He was neutral.

The man was Red Tolliver.

"Hello, Slim," the merchant greeted. "Never expected you to be in town at this time of day. Getting lazy?"

"Looking for the sheriff. Seen him around?"

"He went north this morning, up around Duck Creek. Somebody found a puncher of Hensen's with a hole in his back. But Blackie's in the office. At least, he was a little while ago. Anything up?"

"Plenty, Sol. That nester kid Jude and Cic caught Tabor rustlin' three T4 cows this morning, with unbranded calves. Frank Jergens was with Tabor. They got the drop on Cic an' then on Jude. But that nester kid fooled 'em. He yanked a gun outa a sheath on his saddle an' started throwin' balls. He killed the both of 'em."

Slim knew the importance of being the bearer of vital news. He enjoyed dispensing such news.

"He killed who?" Sol demanded.

"Frank Jergens an' that nester Tabor. Tabor had the drop on him with a Sharps rifle, but Jude was too fast for him. He dropped him cold. Then he got Jergens."

Sol pursed his lips. He hated this thing of cattleman versus nester. There was land enough for all. Why must these men be enemies?

Red Tolliver said, through his lashless lids, "So Tabor's dead?"

Slim eyed him coolly. "Bored plumb center. Seems to me I recollect he was a good friend of yourn an' Harrison's."

His right hand lay close at his hip, fingers near the butt of his pistol. Tolliver had tensed. Sol saw it and pushed through, between them.

"Cut it out!" he yelled. "This is a store, not a saloon. If you want gun fighting, go over to the saloons and do it. I'll have no killings here."

Slim dropped his hand away from his belt. He turned his back on Tolliver and moved on toward the front door. He came out on the porch in the shade of the overhang and turned left, northward along the boardwalk. Across the street the new red sandstone walls of the courthouse gleamed with color in the hot sun. Ahead of him was a sign that jutted out over the boardwalk. It said, *Sheriff's Office.*

Inside the office Blackie sat back of the sheriff's desk, his booted and spurred feet up on the scarred top. He was leaning back in his chair, looking at Edwina. He was laughing softly, and the deputy sheriff's star on his breast seemed to gleam brightly.

"All right," he was saying. "You're wonderful and I love you. But this is a big country and I've got plans. It's a new, fresh, raw country. It's growing. It's got room for men with vision and imagination . . . and I'm one of them."

She looked at him, her lovely face registering understanding, and just a touch of pain.

"No, Blackie," she said firmly, "you don't love me. You don't love anybody but yourself. There was a time when I would have given my life for you. You came out of nowhere, bold and good looking, and different from most men. You were careless—devil-may-care. And you swept me off my feet. I tried hard to resist you. I fought with all the power I had at my command. But it was no use. I'd have followed you to the ends of the earth. I'd have lived with you in a brush and mud shack, had you said the word. But you didn't. All you wanted was for me to come with you to Alden. You made promises. I believed them. And now I know you for what you are. A man whose soul is wrapped up only in himself and his ambitions. You're not fooling me, Blackie."

"You're talking in riddles," the deputy said sharply.

She shook her golden head. "Not riddles, Blackie. The truth. In a small town there are few secrets. I found out things I never realized could have been true."

"Yeah?" he was staring at her, narrowly.

"You have more than four thousand dollars in the bank here in Alden," Edwina replied quietly. "The money means nothing to me, of course. I didn't love you for money. But when you came to Abilene, writing me to meet you there, you didn't have money."

"I won at the wheel that night Jude and me shot it out with the dealer and he killed Harrison," he said in a hard voice.

"About eighteen hundred. You spent much of that despite the fact that you were gone from town for four days and I didn't know where you were."

He shifted his spurred boots to the floor. "What are you getting at?" he demanded, harshly.

SHE smiled at him in a kind of patient sort of way. "Just that this is the end for us, Blackie. The flame in me burned bright, almost fiercely, because I loved you that much—enough to give up everything and follow you, come with you, strong in the belief that you'd keep your promise of a marriage and a future out here. But not anymore. I see you in your true light now. Ambitious, greedy, and willing to push anybody down in the mud so long as you can use them as a stepping stone to your own ambitions. You never loved me. You never loved anybody but yourself. So it's all over. Where you got that four thousand dollars you put in the bank I don't know nor will I ask. But as of now this is the end for us."

She rose and he started to reply, but at that moment Slim Connors came in through the front door.

"Hello, Slim."

"Hello, Blackie. Howdy, Miss," to Edwina. "Sol said Jim wasn't around."

"He's out of town, Slim," Blackie said. "Went north on business this morning. Somebody got dry gulched up north, on Duck Creek. What's on your mind?"

Slim was rolling a cigarette, taking his time. He licked and stuck the quirly in the left corner of his mouth.

"Not much on mine, I reckon," he replied, slashing a match across a cocked up boot sole. "But plenty on the boss's an' Nute's. There was trouble on the south boundary this mornin'."

"Trouble?"

"Maybe it wouldn't exactly be called trouble," the bronk stomper replied, spinning the match toward a brass gobboon. "From what I hear it happened too fast for that. Frank Jergens an' Tabor got the drop on Cic. Him an' Jude was ridin' the south line. Then Jude rode up an' they got the drop on him too. Only thing was they didn't figger on that gun sheath he rigged up on the left fork of his saddle. Accordin' to what little I know about it, Jude used that left hand gun. He got both of 'em cold; chain lightnin'. Their carcasses are down in a gulch ten mile south of the ranch. Travers wants the sheriff to burn the breeze out to the ranch. It's a twenty-four mile ride for you. But it looks like open war. Them nesters were out to git Jude an' for the second time he was a little too fast for 'em. I saw Red Tolliver in Sol's store just now. He seemed plumb upset when I told him about Tabor. Started to throw a gun on me."

Blackie had come up to his feet. Edwina sat looking at the bronk stomper. "Is Jude all right?" she asked.

Slim smiled at her patronizingly. "I reckon so. Nobody said anything about anything bein' wrong with him when I left the ranch."

"I'll saddle a horse right away," Blackie said.

Slim pulled on the cigarette and let it drop between his fingers. "All right, Blackie. That dun of mine is good for the return trip to the ranch. But I'm hongry. I'll eat an' meet you over back of Sol's store in about fifteen minutes."

He went out. Edwina had come to her feet.

"So you don't trust me anymore?" Blackie asked the singer.

"It's the end for us, Blackie."

He shrugged. "What are you going to do?"

"I have a little money and I know dresses and sewing. I'm going to open up a millinery shop in town. I might be the town bad woman but women can't resist dresses."

She went out and Blackie followed her. She turned toward Sol's store and he went along the north side of the square, past the rows of saloons and gambling dives, toward another livery in back of one of them. He saw Slim's lean form disappear into a restaurant not far away.

Blackie went into the livery barn and came out with his riding gear. Ed Bronson, the owner, was home for dinner. The hostler was in the office. Red Tolliver swung down from his horse as the deputy was cinching up a long-legged claybank gelding.

"You hear the news?" Tolliver demanded sharply.

Blackie nodded, grunting as he notched the cinch and took the stirrup down off the horn. He turned to Red. "I'm riding out to make an investigation." He didn't add that he also wanted to see Nell Travers.

TOLLIVER'S heavy, freckled face darkened. "I don't like it, Blackie. You said you'd swing that little sidewinder over on our side. I didn't mind him killin' Harrison. You were supposed to do that in Abilene to get him outa the way so's we could take over. But the kid beat you to it. That was all right, but this ain't. Tabor was the best man with a runnin' iron we got in the pool. You waited too long."

"I'm still running the show, Red," the deputy said coldly, "and don't you ever forget it. It's tough luck, all right, losing these two men. It also means that Davis will have to go. If he hasn't had sense enough to pull stakes and get out, I'll have to make a show of chasing him out of the country. But Jude'll be worth any three Tabors if I can swing him."

"I'll tell the boys," Tolliver scowled.

"They're whisperin' around among themselves that this nester kid ain't a nester at all but a hired killer brought in by Travers to do just the kind of a job he done this mornin'. I don't like it an' neither do they."

Blackie swung up. He looked down at the big pot-bellied man with the two guns. "That's plain poppycock," he snapped. "I brought that kid into the outfit myself. Jude's all right. He'll do what I say. So pass the word along that he's in with us and to do no back shooting. I told you I was running this show. If we work it right the Nester Pool can put three thousand head up the trail next year. They got that Hardin puncher over in the line camp on Duck Creek yesterday. It's a hint to Hensen to sell out. I hear reports Travers is figuring on buying. When he does we'll have him spread out too thin. We can rustle from him and the Circle C north of him dry. Savvy?"

Tolliver shrugged his bull shoulders. "All right, Blackie, just as you say."

"That's what I'm saying. And from now on don't ever be seen talking to me here in town unless we're quarreling and making threats. You slip up the back way of the hotel, as usual."

He rode up back of the saloons, threaded his horse in between them, and presently Slim came out of the restaurant with a toothpick in his mouth. "I reckon we're ready to roll," he said. "soon's I git my hoss."

"No big hurry," Blackie said. "I can't get back to town tonight anyhow. I'll stay at the ranch."

CHAPTER XXI

THEY made the return trip to the ranch, covering the miles in a little over two hours. Connors went on to the corrals to unsaddle his horse and Blackie swung down before the west porch. His status was different now. He was no longer one of the hands; he was a deputy sheriff and, therefore, welcome. Nell Travers met him at the door, opening it for him. Her pretty face was all smiles.

"So it finally had to take range trouble to make you come out and visit us, did it, Blackie?" she pouted prettily.

He removed his hat as he entered, lean and lithe, the two pistols low at his hips. The badge Jim Underhill had pinned on him gleamed brightly on the breast of his red shirt.

"I've been busy," he said, and added gallantly: "But if it was a matter of seeing you, I'd ride through a norther, Miss Travers."

"Never mind that 'Miss Travers' business. Just call me Nell."

He laughed easily. "All right, Nell. How's your mother?"

"Puttering with her flowers as usual. She has to keep busy someway. Say, when are you having another dance in town? It gets lonesome out here."

"Saturday night. And you'd better be there. We've got a new mandolin player—one of Hensen's punchers —who can make that thing talk. You'd better be there and if you don't save me a couple of square dances plus a few waltzes I'm just naturally going to feel all broken up."

They were walking toward the dining room. Jessie came in.

"Jessie, have you any coffee?" Nell demanded.

"Ah keeps a pot on the stove all the time, Miss Nell. You knows that," Jessie replied.

"Then serve us here," Nell commanded.

"Yas, ma'm."

Jessie went back to the kitchen and the two of them sat down. Mrs. Travers came in. She was wearing an old Stetson hat over her prematurely greying locks and carried a short spade in one hand. Blackie rose to his feet.

"Howdy, Mrs. Travers," he greeted.

"Well, Blackie!" she exclaimed. "I'm glad to see you again. So you finally came out to visit us?"

"He came out because he had to," Nell cut in. "That's the only reason he came out."

Mrs. Travers put the spade upright beside the door and removed her hat. "I know. This terrible rustling and all this killing. I waited for Harry for four years while the war was on. I thought that when it was all over we could have some peace—settle down here and grow old in contentment. Looks like there's no peace for a body anymore."

She sighed and took a chair. Jessie came in with two cups of coffee and placed them on the table, being careful to serve from the left side.

"Bring me one too, Jessie," Mrs. Travers said. "I'm just all wore out."

"Where's Harry and Nute?" Blackie asked.

"South, down on the line. That terrible business this morning. They're waiting for you."

Blackie sipped at the coffee, his eyes on the girl's face. She aroused things in him. Strange passions that no other woman ever had aroused, backed up by the knowledge that she was the daughter of a cowman who hoped to become one of the biggest and most influential in Texas.

"It's bad, all right," the deputy agreed. "But this is a fight for survival, and every man has to look out for himself. I hope Jude does. By the way, where is he?"

"I don't know," Nell's mother cut in. "You're not going to arrest that boy, are you, Blackie?"

Blackie laughed at her. "Arrest Jude for killing a couple of cattle thieves? How could you ask such a question, Mrs. Travers.?"

"I'm glad," her daughter put in. "I—"

He looked at her sharply, his eyes glowing. Some kind of a strange jealousy shot through him. He said, "You like Jude, don't you?"

That one brought a rise from her. She flared. "I hate him," she declared angrily.

"No she doesn't," her mother said, taking the cup from Jessie and resting it on the arm of the chair. "Only trouble with her, Blackie, is that Jude is the one hand on this outfit who don't go out of his way to go moonin' over her. She thinks that because she's been back east to school and is passably pretty and the daughter of the owners that all the hands—"

"Mother!" Nell cut in indignantly, and tossed her russet colored hair.

'It's true," her mother declared calmly. "Jude's a good boy. Pokey told me his mother was a school teacher and gave him a good education. I wouldn't be surprised if he isn't better educated than Nell, barrin' the fancy manners they taught her at that expensive school we sent her to. And the only thing that's botherin' her is that Jude 'tends to his own business and don't go moonin' over her. He's one of the best boys we ever had on this ranch. Many's the time I've 'tended to sick hands down with everything from pneumonia to just plain drunkenness but we never had a better hand than Jude."

"I still don't like him," Nell declared.

BLACKIE finished the last of his coffee. He placed the cup on the table and looked at her. That jealousy was flaming within him again. "Yes, you do," he said. "They say that in a woman hate is akin to love. And just because Jude won't—"

Nell was on her feet, indignantly. "That's the silliest statement I ever heard in all my life, Blackie Hepburn! I won't hear another word."

He rose, leisurely and smiling. "All right. Have it your way, you lovely young spoiled thing. But I've got to be going. It'll take some hard riding to make the line and get back to town tonight."

"You can come back with Harry and Nute and stay here tonight," Mrs. Travers said. Cic's down at the bunkhouse waiting for you. He'll take you down to where it happened."

Blackie went out. He swung up and loped down to the bunkhouse. Cic came to the doorway and back of him was Jude.

"You wantin' Jude for this?" Cic asked belligerently.

"Keep your shirt on, boy," Blackie laughed. "I got to go through the formalities. Hello, Jude. Long time no see. I've been hearing things about you, pardner."

"You want me to go with you, Blackie?" Jude asked. He was glad to see his "pardner" again.

"Might be a good idea. Come on, boys, let's go down and take a look. Got a fresh horse handy?"

"Plenty." Cic said. "Come on, Jude."

They saddled up fresh mounts in the corral. Nell Travers came down, wearing a split leather riding skirt. "I'm going with you, Blackie," she announced. She ignored Jude.

"Best news I ever heard," the deputy smiled and went in with his rope to get her a mount.

They went southward, the four of them; and because the horses were fresh it didn't take too long to cover the ten miles. Jude rode to the rear. He always felt uncomfortable in the presence of the girl. He watched the rise and fall of Blackie's lithe, wiry shoulders, riding beside the girl, and he thought of Edwina in town. No doubt about it; Blackie had a way with women. His handsome face and devil-may-care way of life did something to them. But Jude felt alone, even small. He wished that he could be like Blackie. Confident. Easy.

He was unaware that at noon word had spread through the dining dugout, the others of the outfit talking crisply and excitedly by turns. So this green kid from Kansas had done it again? First he'd saved Blackie's life by killing Harrison, head of the nester rustlers, in Abilene. The swaggering two gunman who had shot first but not accurately or fast enough. Now he'd done it again. Downed Tabor and Jergens with that gun he carried in a sheath on the left fork of his saddle. They'd known all along that this kid who freighted the building materials from town was different. You could tell it in the quiet way he conducted himself in the bunkhouse, sticking to himself and not talking much.

They hadn't known nor realized that Jude felt out of place among them, knowing he was green and unseasoned, and therefore feeling an inferiority toward them because they were seasoned cow hands and he was just a younker green as spring grass.

They had accepted his timidity as killer aloofness, and now it was being born out by what had happened this morning. The quiet young kid had done it again. Shot two rustlers with lightning thumbings of a single action six shooter, after they had the drop on him. Killed Tabor, one of the meanest, in the muzzle of a levelled Sharps.

These things Jude was unaware of as they covered the distance to the line. Cic led then down a draw. They broke into a lope and rounded a clump of mesquites. They pulled up by where Nute Shelby and Travers waited. Blackie swung down. Jude sat his horse. He saw the girl's eyes go down to the two crumpled bodies, lying just as they had fallen, the Sharps rifle by Tabor's dead right hand. It was still cocked.

"What are you doing here, young lady?" Travers asked sharply. "This is no place for you."

"I wanted to come and I came," she answered.

HER father ignored her and looked at Blackie, who was swinging down. The deputy strode over and looked at the sprawled bodies. The flies already were at work. Cic had swung down too. He came over and took position, explaining how and what had happened.

"I was standin' here with my gunbelt off with Tabor gettin' ready to let go with thet Sharps," he said. "'Bout that time we heard a horse on the ridge up there an' Jude hove in sight. We was hid by these mesquites. He come on down an' rode right up on us, his right side to us. That gun sheath on the left side of the saddle was outa sight. Tabor lined the Sharps on him an' said as how he should drop his belt. Said he was a friend of Harrison's an' that this was out for Jude. Jude dropped his belt with his right hand. Then he let go with that other gun on the off side of his horse. He got Tabor center with the first shot but the sorrel dumped him an' Frank there spun around an' started shootin'. I was jumpin' for Frank until I saw Jude let go from where he lay on the ground. I damn well kept outa line of fire," he added.

Blackie took off his hat and fanned at the flies around Tabor's open mouth, his eyes on the Sharps. He stepped over and pcked up Frank Jergen's gun examining it critically.

"Two shots fired," he said.

Cic nodded. He was still a little belligerent at the thought that Jude might be arrested. "He thumbed 'em at Jude when he came off that pitching sorrel," he said.

Blackie tossed the gun back to the ground. He looked into Travers' questioning eyes. "Hell, you called me out on a twenty-four mile ride for *this*? It was a waste of time. Let's get back to the ranch."

"I'll send a couple of the boys down in the morning to bury them." Travers said. He strode to his horse and swung up, Nute Shelby following.

It was after dark when they got back to the ranch. Jude unsaddled, put his saddle under the shed, divested himself of chaps, and went over to the cook house. Pokey and Ike were finishing up the dishes and getting things ready for breakfast. Admiral Big Bottom was stalking along the length of the tables. He gave Jude a beady glare.

"*An we threw the bloomin' bos'n in the ocean,*" he croaked.

"Got any supper left?" Jude asked. "We got in kind of late."

He extended a forefinger toward the beady-eyed Admiral and Ike let out a yell of warning. But the Admiral had put forth a horny claw and came up. He worked his way to Jude's shoulder, while Ike stood staring.

"Well, I'll be blowed," spluttered the ex-galley cook. "First time he ever failed to take a finger off any strange swab. Sure, we got some supper for you, matey. So you let go with a broadside at them pirates, heh? Sunk 'em with the first shot? Sent 'em down with their masts busted. Good boy. That'll teach 'em not to go buccaneering in shallow waters."

Pokey shot him a hard glance of warning. These were the kind of things a man didn't want mentioned.

"Yu talk too much," he snarled, reaching for a clean plate. "Yu an' thet dam' bird too. We got some butter beans an' ham hocks left, Jude. The coffee's still warm. I expect I can find a mite of apple pie fer yu too."

Jude lifted the squawking and protesting Admiral down to the table's scrubbed top and ate. The Admiral stood by, eyeing the food.

Jude ate, and Ike, busy with the last of the dishes, said, "He's been actin' strange lately. Like as maybe there's a hurricane coming up."

Jude didn't answer. He ate silently, as most punchers did. Finally he pushed back his plate. He rose and picked it up, carrying it and the other utensels to the big dish pan.

"I'll give you a hand, if you want," he said.

Pokey shook his head. "We're about through. I seen Blackie an' heard his voice when he rid in. He arrestin' yu fer thet fuss on the south line this mornin'?" he demanded, the same belligerency in his tone that Cic had displayed.

Jude shook his head and rolled a cigarette.

"It's a dam' good thing," glared the cook, and the newly washed dishes clattered as he slid them over onto a table to be dried by Ike.

JUDE went back to the bunkhouse. There were two poker games in progress. They ceased at his entrance, and again he felt that sharp pain of lonliness go through him. He wanted to be one of them, to listen, to learn, to take part in the arguments, sometimes ribald, that were a part of bunkhouse life, but there was a gulf between them; a gulf made by three dead men. They were punchers who wore guns out of sheer self protection; he was the man who had killed three rustlers.

Mike said, "Hello, Jude. Come on over and get in this poker game before these polecats take me for my month's wages. Let's you and me double up and split our winnings. We'll take 'em."

"I'm not much of a hand at poker, Mike," Jude confessed. "Matter of fact, I've never played cards before. Don't even know how."

That one didn't decrease the silence. They had interpreted wrong again. This killer from Kansas was either too good to play with them or he'd spent so much time with guns that he hadn't learned to play.

"But I'll set in, if you'll show me," Jude smiled.

That one brought relaxation and a few short laughs. Jude pulled his money out of a pants pocket and started over. Then Blackie's figure filled the open doorway. Greetings and exclamations rose. They bantered at him, gibed at him, jeered about the star on his shirt front, and made scathing remarks about a good puncher being so lazy he wouldn't work anymore.

"Take it easy, boys, I got somebody with me," Blackie smiled, and nodded toward the doorway. Nell had accompanied him down to the bunkhouse. The awkward silence came again and Jude was glad. The silence was because of the presence of the girl. Such a thing had never happened since her return from back east.

Blackie sensed it and said, "I just wanted to talk with Jude for a moment. Want to take a walk Jude?"

"Sure," Jude replied, turning.

Mike and Cic and Slim Connors had risen simultaneously. Blackie caught the chilled looks in their eyes and grinned.

"Jude's in the clear, boys. This is personal. Don't forget that he's my pardner."

Jude followed him out and the girl fell in beside them, Blackie gallantly taking her arm. They went over toward where the outlines of one of the huge freight wagons could be seen against the sky.

"I haven't seen you much lately," Jude remarked to make conversation.

"We've been busier than you think. That's why I wanted to talk with you. Sit down, Jude."

They were at the wagon. Nell primly seated herself on the lowered tongue where the double trees crossed its base and Blackie sat next to her. Jude took seat and rolled a cigarette. The flame of the match lit up his young face for a brief moment before it flared into darkness again, blown out. He pulled on the quirly.

"What did you want to see me about, Blackie?" he asked quietly.

"Not what you think. The Tabor and Jergens business is finished. You did what any good cowhand would have done. I'd have thrown them the same way you did, had I been in your boots. Self preservation is the first law of nature. Only thing is you threw that gun like lightning. You got Tabor and then Jergens, and we'll let the matter rest there. But the Nester Pool is out to get you, Jude. Everytime you line a ridge you can expect a rifle shot. Tabor was one of their best, next to Red Tolliver, who's now their leader. So I've got to protect you, Jude. I can do that in only one way."

How?"

"By pinning a deputy sheriff's badge on you. You can work with me—the Lord knowing we need another man in the office. I can swing it with Jim. After this fracas today your reputation will grow. These nesters will give you a wide berth with that star on your shirt. They won't dare drop you like they will now at the first opportunity. What do you say, pardner?"

Jude pulled on the half smoked length of the rolled cigarette. The red glow of the tip lit up his serious young face. He sent the butt sailing in a red arc, into the darkness twenty feet away. He rose to his feet.

"Thanks for the offer, Blackie. But I want to learn the cow business. I can't do it, siding you with a reputation I don't deserve. I can't learn it hiding back of a lawman's badge. I'll stick here, I reckon, and take my chances."

"But you're refusing!" Nell Travers' indignant voice said in the darkness. "You can't do that!"

"Yes, I can," came the reply through the darkness. "I'm going to become a cowman not an officer of the law. Thanks for the offer, Blackie. I appreciate it. I'll watch the ridges and and if I have to high tail it, I'll do it. But I'm still going to become a cowman."

HE SAID good night and left them there on the wagon tongue, aware that Blackie's arm was around the girl and that he was making love to her.

Jude thought of Edwina in town and something chilled inside of him. He didn't know what or why. He wondered if Blackie was his "pardner" after all; if a man didn't have to make his own trails. Blackie's influence over him was still strong, but he knew that he'd have to make his own way; work out his own destiny. Where it would lead he didn't know. He looked back again.

Blackie was kissing the girl, and Jude went inside and went to bed.

CHAPTER XXII

THE roundup got under way a few weeks later, Pokey rumbling out of the ranch yard in the heavily loaded chuckwagon, followed by Joe in the bedroll wagon. Peanut remained behind to continue superivision of the new home, which was making good progress. There was to be a big housewarming when the job was done, Nell Travers sending invitations to a couple of girls who had attended school with her. They were coming out with their families.

The outfit camped ten miles southwest of the home ranch that first night, and the next morning Jude began learning first hand the meaning of the word *cow puncher.* Under Shelby's crisp orders twenty-two men began loping off in pairs to comb a designated section of the mesquite country and throw everything back toward where the main herd and the cutout would be held. There would be some branding but not much; just to catch what had been missed in the spring, or calf, roundup. For this was the beef roundup. The cutouts, prime beef stuff, would be thrown onto the north range and grazed there during the winter and spring before starting up the trail to Kansas.

With Mike Kessler siding him, Jude went into the gullies that morning and went to work. He kept a sharp lookout, for this was close to nester country, and nobody had forgotten their threats. Davis, the pardner of Frank Jergens, had openly sworn to shoot Jude on sight. He had disappeared from his job the day following the shooting and gone over to the nesters with whom he'd formerly worked hand in glove, stealing his boss's own cattle. Reports had it that he was living on Tabor's place, married to the nester girl he'd been courting while working in the line camp.

All morning long Jude and Mike combed them out of the brush, cows, calves, bulls and steers. Jude shot one bull that morning with his pistol, a stringy scrub fully a fourth smaller than the regular breeders. Travers wanted no runty stuff among his brand. The herd grew as trickles of cattle came in from all points of the compass. The bawling increased and a string of riders continually loped toward the remuda corral to get fresh mounts out of their string. Shelby fired one rider that morning for bloodying the sides of his horse, paying off the man and ordering him to drift. There was no room on the T4 for such a hand. At noon Jude loped in and ate, hungry and dusty, a streak on one cheek where he'd been struck by a limb while plunging down the side of a gulley after a wild steer. He took time out to smoke, saddled the cream sorrel now one of his string, and went back to the brush.

It went on for days. They worked, ate, rolled into their tarps at night too tired for conversation, and slept hard. Jude took his share of night herding, went his way in silence, and learned fast. If he was aware of Shelby's sharp approving eyes, he paid no heed. Or if he was aware that the others watched him with sidewise glances when they thought he wasn't looking, he ignored it. He was in the business he had set out to learn, doing a job that, despite its rigors, he loved.

"That kid," Shelby said to Travers, "goes at his job like a top hand. Give him a little more seasoning at the calf roundup next spring and he'll hold his own with any man of the outfit."

"I know, Nute. I hope he don't get itchy feet and drift like some of these hands'll do. I want to put him in a line camp up north this winter; with an older man, somebody like Cic. Them nesters up in that country won't be as hostile as the ones on the south boundary. Not near as much chance of a slug in the back. I haven't made it public yet, Nute, but I've been talkin' with Hensen. He's going to make some kind of a count on his roundup, and I wouldn't be surprised if I don't own his iron one of these days. Him and his wife are going to build a house in town and live there this winter."

Shelby pursed his lips thoughtfully. They were sitting their mounts on a rise about a quarter of a mile from where the herd milled and bawled and the dust rose. Taking over Hensen's brand meant more responsibility and appointing of one of the men as foreman of the new outfit. Shelby was already turning over in his mind who the man would be when they rode in to camp and ate dinner.

The cutout had more than two hundred head of cows with unbranded calves that had been missed in the spring, and that afternoon they started branding on the open plain. Riders went in with swinging ropes and came out with bawling, husky yearlings in the loops, dragging them over to where sweating men swore and gibed at each other.

"Hot iron, hot iron," Mike jeered at the disgruntled tender of the branding fire. "This thing ain't any warmer than one of Pokey's biscuits. It won't even singe the hair."

"Yah?" snarled the other. "Then suppose you bent over and lemme test it against the seat of yore pants. I'll bet yuh a month's pay yuh beller louder than any damn bull in the herd."

Mike tossed back the odorous iron, released the yearling, then went in after another and much larger one. He lost his footing and went down under the frantically struggling animal and roars of laughter drowned out his oaths.

"Haw-haw-haw!" jeered the tender of the branding fire, triumphantly. "It's hard to tell which is the yearlin' an' which is Mike. They both of 'em got the same kind of foolish look on their faces. Come to think of it," he added sagely to Jude and another young puncher called "Tow-Head," "they even looks alike. Same shape ears, same eyes, and the same shaped noses. An' both of their whiskers is red. Why, the way they're layin' there slobberin' over each other you'd think they wuz brothers."

JUDE wiped tears of laughter from his eyes and went in with Tow-Head, the two of them flanking for Mike. They got the yearling off the unfortunate puncher and Mike came to his feet, limping and swearing. He wiped calf slobbers from his face.

"Yep," went on the man at the branding fire, "I never see any puncher git so plumb affectionate. There they wuz, a-layin' in each other's arm's a-huggin' and' a-kissin' each other on the noses. I allus thought cow punchers didn't love the critters but Miz Kessler's un-favorite son is shore different. Mike feels so plumb sorry at havin' to hurt the critters that he kisses 'em before—"

He ducked and the puncher with the calf on the end of his rope went into convulsions. Jude and Tow-Head held the animal down while Mike, with a final "Go to hell," at his tormenter, went deftly to work with a knife. He put Travers' gotch on the lower edge of the right ear, then leaned back and cut again. Two objects were dropped into a pail already half filled. That night they would all have "mountain oysters' for supper, cooked as only Pokey could cook them, and a cow camp delicacy.

Mike stamped a neat "T" on the animal's hip, laid a "4" beside it. Two clouds of pungent grey smoke went up and the emasculated yearling let out double bawls of pain. It went loping spraddle-legged back into the herd to find its bellowing mother, and five minutes later was taking on nourishment, its long-horned mother smelling and then licking it suspiciously.

Mike tossed back the irons and watched it go. "Two or three years from now he'll be in a freight car, heading for Kansas City to make rump steaks."

"He will if the blow-flies don't get at him," Tow-Head, big and husky and good-natured, said. "This weather's purty warm for cuttin'."

"That's your job to see he don't get 'em, boy," Mike retorted.

"Oh, no," Tow-Head grinned hastily. "After all the affection yuh showed that critter I wouldn't think of lettin' anybody but *yuh* look after him."

They finished the branding and the beef cutout and moved on, northward this time, rounding up on the prairie within three miles of Alden. Shelby seemed to be everywhere at once, giving orders, directing operations, and seemingly always making marks in a tally book. Hensen had ridden down with three of his men and driven back some thirty head of his stuff that had drifted south from Duck Creek. He was to begin his roundup the following week or ten days, and he with Travers and Shelby had been in serious huddles.

At the time Hensen had established his iron and began putting it on all the unbranded stuff on the prairies, as other men all over Texas were doing, there had been no thought of rustling. There had been no reason for it. A man didn't have to steal a cow bearing another man's iron where there were plenty of unbranded stuff for the taking. But with the coming of the railroad into Kansas the free stuff was gone, mostly all under iron now, and then was when rustling began.

Hensen, an honest man himself, hadn't thought to devise an iron that would be tough on the brand blotters—and in which he differed very much from Travers. Travers' T4 was as hard to work over with a running iron as Hensen's H Bar (H—) was easy.

And it had been the sharp-eyed Cic who had spotted the critter. Jude was with them when they roped and tied the animal. Shelby rolled it over on its other side, a husky two-year old heifer.

He bent and parted the red hair, running his finger over the freshly healed scab. The brand was an 8 Cross (8+) now.

"About two weeks ago, I'd say," he grunted to Hensen. "A damned crude job, too. Any of them nesters up there running an Eight Cross iron?"

HENSEN shook his snow white head, a man full seventy years old and still strong in the saddle. "Never heard of any, Nute. But then they come an' go an' sell out to each other all the time. Most of their brands ain't even registered."

"Probably not. Well, the man who did this job was either an amateur at the game or a puncher who was mighty careless. He probably drove the animal off your range an' then it got away from him an' drifted back. Looks like to me that if you sell out to Harry we'll have our work cut out for us. Rustlers on the north and south boundaries with thirty miles of open range to draw from. What about your men?" he added sharply.

"All honest as far as I know, Nute. They don't go much for nesters."

Nute Shelby rose, freeing the animal's four tied feet. They all swung up.

"How's your tally showing up?" Hensen inquired.

"Short," snapped the foreman. "A good three hundred head under what I estimated from the calf roundup last spring. And it's most grown stuff. If Jim Underhill and Blackie don't put a stop to this rustling I'm going to! I'll do it if I have to take a hundred men and burn every nester shack within fifty miles."

"That's one reason I'm selling out, Nute. I'm gettin' a mite old to be mixed up in a range war. The nesters are gettin' bigger all the time, even startin' a fair sized outfit on what I allus figgered was my south range. But they've got as much legal right on that land as me an' the Missus have because it's state land."

"They haven't got any right on *mine*!" snapped out Travers. "I fought Indians in this country when there wasn't a town here. My mother is buried with four miles of here, her head split open with a Commanche tommahawk. I settled this range. I rode it as a kid, tending my father's ponies and keeping a sharp lookout for the red devils to top the ridges. Twice they chased me almost to the house at a run and then drove off the ponies. After the war I went south to where the cattle were thicker and fought tooth and nail to get my outfit going. I was so poor I couldn't even put a herd up the trail until this year. This is my range and I'll fight to hold it. It's a hell of a note when a man has to put line camps less than ten miles apart to prevent open cattle stealing in broad daylight.

"Come on, Nute. Let's go in town and have a talk with Jim Underhill and Blackie."

CHAPTER XXIII

BOTH Underhill and his deputy were in the office when the two men rode in. The sheriff just a few minutes before had come in with a handcuffed Mexican prisoner, the man having killed another Mexican in their herder camp several miles over in the bad country. He would be confined to the cell of the wooden jail until the circuit judge came in to hear his trial.

"Hello, boys," the sheriff greeted. "How's things going on the roundup? Looks like a lot of cows out there."

"A few," Nute said.

"Sit down boys?" Blackie invited, nodding toward chairs. "How much longer will it take you to finish?"

Travers pushed back his hat as he sat down. "Not very long. And if those nesters keep rustling us at the rate they're doing we won't have enough left by next year."

"I know," Underhill put in. "I've got to play neutral and not take sides. But I'm personally for the cowmen. Yet you show me any proof that I can sink my teeth into and I'll go after any man, nester or puncher, who's rustling. I wish I had more help. One of us has to stay in the office most of the time and it's no easy job the way we're on the go. They haven't even got a town marshal here, so that means that after a man's rid a horse all day long he's got to spend a few hours makin' the rounds of the saloons to stop fights. Then on Saturday nights when we have a dance it means staying up some sometimes 'til they dance themselves out at daylight an' decide to go home."

"Maybe we'd better talk to the commissioners and see about a couple of more deputies," Travers agreed. "Because if something ain't done about this rustling I'm going after them with guns. We're near three hundred head short on the tally so far since the calf roundup last spring. Prime stuff, most of it, with about sixty or seventy cows that should have big calves follerin' 'em being calfless. There's one roan cow in particular that I remember having a nice big bull calf with a white splotch on its shoulder. Her calf's gone. Three hundred head, Jim!"

Underhill whistled. The men of the Nester Pool were getting bolder. And what made it worse was that if you got the proof and went out and arrested one, they'd insist on a few nesters as jurymen—which automatically would bring about a hung jury. The thing would drag on and finally blow up in smoke.

The sheriff said so.

"I know it," Shelby said in his curt voice. "But we've got to do something, Jim. We've got about seven hundred head of long horn cattle running on a range of about thirty miles. It's a big outfit and'll get bigger. I suppose you heard that Harry's taking over Hensen's outfit on Duck Creek and adding it to the T4? Well, even an outfit that big can't stand being rustled at the rate we are. A few years of that, plus drouth or maybe a bad drop in prices will put the T4 under as quick as though it was a small outfit. We'll buckle right in the middle."

Underhill sighed. His feet were hurting him and he wanted to go home and crawl into a good hot bath and curse himself for ever letting them elect him as sheriff.

"You ever hear of an Eight Cross iron?" Travers demanded.

Underhill shook his head. "New one on me."

He told about the job of brand blotting they had found on the Hensen critter that day.

Blackie spoke up, reaching for cigarette papers and tobacco sack in the breast pocket of the red shirt. The shirt contrasted beautifully with his pitch black hair and handsome, freshly shaved face.

"Eight Cross?"

"Yeah?"

"I think that's an outfit just starting up about forty miles northwest of here, up in the Cap Rock country. Now that I'm packing this badge I can stop in at a nester's place for a drink of water without getting my head shot at."

"So you heard something?" grunted Shelby.

"Yes, I heard something, Nute," Blackie said slowly, looking at him steadily. "The nesters say that these big ranches the size of a Spanish land grant have to go—make room for smaller outfits. They say it's not right that a few big owners should have a two or three hundred mile stretch of open range, hogging up land they don't own and keeping the little fellows out. So the Cross Eight is being built. New bunkhouse and corrals. They got water up there and they're starting with about two hundred head, supposedly bought."

"Supposedly, hell!" exploded Travers, his face contorting with dark anger. "Half of those cows are either mine or Hensen's. The others came from the big outfits far to the north. But it *is* a nester ranch, eh? You're sure?"

"Not only that," Blackie replied, licking the paper. "But down on your south boundary, Harry, Red Tolliver has pushed old man Treddle back and just walked in and took over part of his grass. He bought out a couple of families that are going back to Missouri and moved the houses over to his own for bunkhouses. He's got five nesters riding for him as full time punchers, looking out after the pool stuff on that new range. You see what they're doing? First it was the Comanches on these prairies. They've been pretty well whipped out. Next you cowmen took over a range and held it. Now it's the nesters moving in—settlers, they call themselves—and shoving you out. It's not only happening here; it's happening all over the country, nester kids are growing up who won't touch a plow. They ride a horse. A new crop of punchers coming on, getting started like a lot of men get started—swinging a long loop on somebody else's stuff. And there's nothing on God's green earth you can do about it. You shoot one and another pop's up like a steer outa the brush and takes his place. You've got about twenty-five men and they've got two hundred, and some of them are bad men with a gun and not afraid of the devil himself. If you make it open range war to see who survives, you'll go under, Harry. Your range gone, your cattle rustled, and three chances to one losing your own life."

THE three had sat and listened to him, and it was pretty obvious from the thoughtful look on Travers' face that the shot had gone home. He knew that Blackie was telling the truth. Underhill stirred and sighed with weariness from the long ride to pick up the Mexican prisoner.

"I didn't want to come out in the open and say it, boys, but Blackie sure hit the spike on the head. But I repeat what I said—I'm for the cowmen, and you get me any proof that some certain man or men are guilty and I'll go after them. If I can't bring them back alive, then I'll do it dead."

"They'll never take my range. I'll hold it. I'll hold every foot of it if I have to hire a hundred punchers to ride it with rifles on the saddles. They'll never take my range."

"Well," shrugged Blackie, "it's your ruckus, Harry. We'll back you as far as the law and our limited means will go. But you're fighting men who were at Bull Run and Gettysburg and Richmond with rifles in their hands. Men from both sides who can, and will, kill. You're bucking a stacked deck, Harry."

Travers got up and paced one turn down the confines of the room. It was going to be tough, but he thought he could pull through ahead of them and hold his range.

But he was a badly worried man over what Blackie had said and the deputy saw the look on his face.

"I could make a suggestion," Blackie smiled up at him. "It might be a way out I don't want to make it on account of knowing how touchy you are about the range."

"What is it?"

"It's better to play safe and lose some than to buck a deck and lose more. I'd suggest that you let me arrange to meet with a committee of nesters from the south and a committee over on your north and western boundaries. Pull back a few miles and cut a definite boundary and agree to let them get started. They —"

"Hell no!" exploded Travers angrily. "Give 'em an inch and they'd crowd a foot."

"Then buy your land and establish definite ownership."

Travers stared at him aghast. "Buy it?" he almost roared. "*Buy it?* Did the Comanches pay anything for it? Are the nesters payin' anything for it? Hundred and hundreds of miles of open range all over Texas, free for the taking, and I'm supposed to *pay* for it! I never heard of anything so dam' silly in all my life, spending money for *land!*"

Blackie's wiry shoulders shrugged. "All right, Harry, I won't say any more. But that's what the new Cross Eight outfit is doing, getting title to land for a few pennies an acre. They've had surveyors on your northwest range and the line will run about three miles inside what you figure is your boundary. They're buying *your* range with the money they got from that rustled NP herd they took to Abilene. They bought a hundred and sixty acres on the place where they're putting up the ranch house. They're spreading their money thin, leaving all the land *in between.* I know all this for a fact because since I've been packing this badge I've got around quite a bit. I've learned things. When the deeds come through from the State Land Office they'll own part of your range."

"The devil they will! The first nester who crosses that boundary will get his head shot off. I'll go up there with a dozen men and burn that place down."

Blackie got up, his eyes cold. Travers didn't know it, of course, but it was Blackie himself who was Cross Eight and owned that land.

"When you do, Harry, the State of Texas'll say that Jim and myself will have to come after you with a warrant for your arrest."

He got up and went out, strolling up the street. Red Tolliver stood leaning against a doorjamb with his big belly protruding past the wall. There was nobody around and Blackie paused briefly.

"I just saw Travers an' Nute Shelby in town a little while ago," Red said, his lashless lids opaque.

"They're in the office, considerably upset over a three hundred steer and calf shortage. And one of Hensen's drifters showed up in the T4 roundup with brand made over into a Cross Eight so crudely done it looked like even the kids are trying their hand at rustling. Tell those fools to be careful!"

Tolliver grinned. "Sorta upset, hey?"

"Travers? Plenty. But we've got him worried and just about where we can start to work. He bought Hensen's Duck Creek outfit—or is going to buy it right away. We'll have him spread out thin, where we want him. Give me five years and we'll have his range broken up into nothing, with small spreads all over it."

"And you owning the Cross Eight, biggest of the bunch," grinned the rustler. "Yo're near as much of a plain blackguard as I am, Blackie."

Blackie smiled at that one. "More so, Red. *You're* an honest one!"

He went on up the street, pleased with the world and himself. Jim Underhill had repeatedly said he would not run for a second term as sheriff. That job Blackie would get. When the time came he would be in the political saddle, handling the law on one side and the rustling on the other. He could afford to come out into the open and assert his power, for that was what Blackie wanted. Power. Once he attained it he would whip the nesters off and expand his Cross Eight brand; a brand he had carefully failed to register. Just surround himself with the right kind of men and he would control this whole section of the country.

HE thought of Jude. He'd have to get Jude on as one of the new deputies. That young puncher from Kansas had spunk; Blackie had noted it from the first day they met. Train him right—use influence over him—and he'd become a trained instrument to exterminate those who got in the way.

Blackie passed Edwina's new dress shop and went in. She was alone, busy fitting a dress to a dummy. He looked at her golden head and lovely face and the old desire came up in him. But there was nothing more than desire. He was going to marry Nell Travers some day, when the ranch of her father was reduced to a fraction of its former size and he controlling that eventually.

"Hello, sweet," he smiled.

"How are you, Blackie?"

"Busy, but never too busy to come see the prettiest girl in the country who doesn't love me anymore. I still think you're wasting your time in here with this foolish idea of pins and needles and thread when you could be singing at one of the places here in town."

"I sang in those public places because I loved to sing. I still do," she answered. "But I'm a dressmaker now."

"I'll be in and see you tonight."

She shook her head. "No, you won't, Blackie. I belonged to you because I believed in you. I was your woman. I'm not anymore."

He started to say something but a bootstep sounded in the doorway and they both turned.

It was Jude.

CHAPTER XXIV

JUDE had broken a cinch that afternoon in a hard run down a draw after a bunch quitting steer. The horse had almost fallen with him, but the cinch had let go and given him a bad spill. There hadn't been an extra one in the outfit, so the straw boss in charge during Nute's absence had told him to come on in and get himself a new one and bring back some extras from Sol's store. But it being late and Jude not due for night trick that night he could stay in town so long as he got back the next morning. So Jude had made a makeshift cinch of rope and ridden into town.

"Jude!" Edwina exclaimed and advanced toward him, holding out both hands. "I'm glad to see you again."

He greeted Blackie, who hadn't missed the affection on her part.

"Hello, cow puncher." The deputy grinned. "How's the cow punching business?"

"Pretty good, Blackie. We're just about through. But I busted a cinch and rode in to get a new one."

"You'll learn the hard way, boy. That deputy's job will be open pretty soon. I need a man I can trust to side me."

Jude shook his head. "Thanks, but I'll stick with Travers. Well," he said awkwardly, "I'd better get going. I just saw you two in here and stopped by. Got to get a haircut. See you later," and he turned to go out.

"One minute, Jude," Blackie said sharply.

Jude turned.

"Red Tolliver is down the street. Don't forget that he was a friend of Harrison and Tabor. No gun fighting."

"I'm not aiming to," Jude answered and went out. He swung aboard the horse and went to Sols, going around the back way. He went inside across the loading platform. The first person he saw was Nell Travers. She greeted him with unexpected warmth.

He touched his hand to his hat brim and returned the greeting, the lonesomeness and hunger of all cowboys stirring through him. She was beautiful, hers a different kind from that of Edwina; and this was the first time she'd ever unbent from those "hifalutin" ways her father spoke of. Ranch life was taking her back to its bosom again.

"I saw Blackie up the street," he said to relieve his awkwardness.

He was surprised at the rise in her. She said coolly, "I don't care if you did. Blackie's a little too vain over his good looks and deputy sheriff's badge. He thinks that all he's got to do is to look at a girl and she'll fall over in a faint. It's about time he found out different. Are you staying in for the dance tonight? Mother and I are. We drove in in the buggy."

He hadn't known about the dance. Back in Kansas the farmers usually got together about every other week-end and threw a dance, and dancing was something that Jude enjoyed. But this was the first time he realized that it was Saturday again. Men lost track of time on a roundup.

"I reckon I might," he said, and then

Sol came up.

"Hello, young fellow," he greeted, extending a hand. "I thought all of the T4 hands were busy at the roundup."

"I broke a cinch," Jude said. "Came in to get a new one and some extras."

"Sure. Up front here."

Jude followed him, leaving the girl. The store was pretty busy, for many people were in town. A cow puncher looked at him hard but Jude paid no attention. He didn't know at the time that this was Davis, former line camp pardner of Jergens, one of the two men Jude had shot that other morning. Nester women and children bought, and gossiped as they bought, while ranchers and cow punchers, coldly aloof, discussed water, the condition of the range, and the probable prices of fall beef.

Jude got the cinches and went out to his horse. He untied the improvised rope girth, fitted the new cinch, resaddled, and tied the others back of the cantle. By the time he put the horse in the livery and got a haircut and shave at the barbershop it was dark. He ate and strolled up the street. A man passed him. Red Tolliver. Tolliver went by without speaking.

Jude passed on up the boardwalk past Edwina's shop. It was dark. He felt lonely and out of place, despite the fact that just across the square, in an abandoned store building, the lights were on and the fiddlers were tuning up for the first square dance. The crowd was building up inside, both nesters and punchers from the outlying ranches. This was one place where they all met on common ground. During a dance everything else was forgotten. There was, of course, the usual number of fights; they were inevitable when some young rider showed too many marked attentions to a pretty nester girl and one of her men folks took it up. Jude strolled over, figuring he'd have a few turns. He considered himself a pretty good square dancer. He'd certainly had enough practice.

His eyes searched the crowd for familiar faces. He saw only Mrs. Travers and Nell, the latter in a new dress. Nute Shelby was in earnest conversation with an elderly looking cowman and Travers was over, laughing and talking with one of the tuning-up fiddlers. Then a man walked out into the middle of the floor and yelled, "Get your pardners fer the first square dance."

JUDE stood on the outside, looking in through the doors, which were crowded with the usual number of bashful swains. Some would soon get up enough nerve to go in and start asking pardners; the others would stand outside during the course of the dance and then go home. Jude turned and walked across the square. The lights of the hotel lobby loomed up before him and some instinct caused him to go in and ask for Edwina's room number. He went up the stairs to the second floor and paused as he heard voices in her room.

It was Blackie.

Jude would have turned away but something in their words rooted his boots to the floor of the hallway.

"Blackie, I told you not to come in here tonight. We've been over all this before," the singer was saying. "Everything is finished between us. I don't care for you anymore. It's all done—over with."

"So you're turning 'respectable?' " came his voice. "Everybody in town knows that you came here with me."

"What they know or think in this town doesn't bother me, Blackie. All I know is that you've played your game your way and that was when I pulled out of it. Gossip gets around, Blackie. They're saying that you're going to become Travers' son-in-law. I wish you luck and I feel sorry for her. Now get out, Blackie."

Jude heard the sharp spat of a hand and a hissing intake of her breath. He was on the verge of turning away, ashamed that he had listened, but something wouldn't let him. He opened the door and went in.

Blackie turned at the sound, his face aflame with anger at both the girl and the interruption, and Jude knew in this moment that he was seeing the deputy in a new light. Blackie was handsome, devil-may-care, and had been his "pardner." But this was a juvenile something that was gone now; it never had existed.

Blackie recovered himself with a smile.

"Hello, Jude," he said casually. "Don't tell me you're coming up to take Edwina to the dance?"

"I sorta figured on something like that," Jude lied. Actually he had wanted to just talk with her to cover the loneliness eating at him. He had no friends except Mike and Cic and Pokey, and perhaps Nute Shelby, the three dead men of the Nester Pool putting a chasm between himself and the easy relations prevalent among the rest of the men of the outfit. He merely had been lonesome. He knew that Edwina was Blackie's woman, and the knowledge had kept from his mind any other thought than just being a good friend.

"I'm glad you came, Jude," Edwina said hurriedly, recovering her poise. "Blackie's in a mean mood tonight."

"I wasn't aimin' to intrude."

"I'm glad you did. If you'll wait a few minutes until I fix up a bit I'll go with you."

She disappeared into another room, closing the door back of her. Blackie grinned ruefully and looked at Jude.

"She's sorta on the prod lately," he explained. "Don't know what's got into her. Jude, that offer to come in with me is still open. I told you in Abilene that if you'd stick with me you'd be a rich man some day. It still goes. I've got plans. How about quitting when the roundup is over and coming into town?"

"I think I'll stick, Blackie."

The deputy's eyes glinted a little. "Jude, it's going to be a showdown between the cowmen and nesters one of these days and the cowmen are going to lose. These nesters are turning ranchers now and pushing in on the ranges. Travers might not be able to hold his ranges."

"He's still paying me my wages," Jude answered.

"Like that, eh? All right, Jude. But it might mean a range war and the law will have to be impartial."

It was clearly a warning. The implication in the words couldn't be anything else.

"I'll have to wait until it comes and do what I feel is right," Jude answered. "A man's supposed to be loyal to his outfit, Blackie."

The deputy rose. He nodded. "I hope you don't have to kill anymore men, Jude. The law is getting claws these days. The Texas Rangers are dropping through here more and more. Maybe I can't protect you next time as I did. Well, anyhow," he finished, laughing, "take good care of Edwina at the dance. The womenfolk will probably stare at you for bringing her."

"Is that why you never took her anyplace?" Jude asked.

"I don't like that kind of talk, Jude," Blackie said sharply, no laughter in his eyes now.

"Neither do I. Let's forget it."

"Sure, let's forget it."

Blackie went out and closed the door behind him. Edwina's voice said, "Is he gone?"

"I reckon."

"Jude, come in here and help me with this new dress. I've decided to change. I need help."

HE went into her bedroom, that strange constriction hitting his stomach at sight of her getting ready to put the new one on over head. She was in petticoat. She paused and as he came closer something happened to her. She looked at him, and then took his young face between her hands, dropping the dress.

She kissed him squarely on the lips. "Jude, come to me," she whispered.

"No," he said, and he thought of his mother, of Nell Travers' face as he had last seen her over in the dancehall.

He went out, back to the livery, saddled up his horse and returned to the outfit.

CHAPTER XXV

THE outfit finished the roundup and rolled back into the home ranch. The nights were getting cold now. Jude worked at the ranch for a few more weeks as the days grew shorter and the mornings bit harder into them when they went out to saddle up. The horses knew it too, giving evidence of bucking just a little harder mornings to warm up. Slim Connors had brought in a batch of geldings and was breaking them down in one of the big circular corrals. And Connors knew his business.

Again the astute Nute Shelby showed his hand. Jude had come out of the roundup as one of the best riders of the outfit. He had learned much about working a cow horse and how to handle the wild longhorns in the brush. But Shelby, realizing his capabilities, wanted to complete his education.

He put Jude down into the corral, working with Slim Connors for a couple of weeks. It was interesting work and he loved it; for, like so many bronk stompers, Connors had a way with horses. It was amazing what he could do with one of the wild bunch. He was the school master, starting his green charges in at the beginning, progressing them slowly, and gradually letting them know who was master. He showed Jude how to put a bridle and saddle on one of them with two long lariats attached to the bit and run back through the stirrups. Jude stood in the center of the corral, the ropes in his strong young hands, and let the animal learn what a bit and reins were for. Sometimes Nell Travers came out to sit on the fence and watch. The big house was almost finished; it would take a few more weeks to do the painting. It was to be all white with green trimmed window casings and shutters.

He hadn't seen Edwina since that night, for he remembered the pain in Edwina's eyes when he had left her and not gone to the dance; she thought it was because she'd been Blackie's woman.

And Nell Travers had changed much. She had turned seventeen now and was growing into full blown beauty; and the months at the ranch had brought on the transformation her father had hoped for.

The side saddle was collecting dust under one of the sheds. She rode astraddle using a split leather skirt, and she bantered with the men. It was only when she talked to Jude that her attitude was different. All the old petulance was gone. She greeted him openly and in friendliness.

"The trouble with you, Jude," she said one day, "is that you're too damned polite to me because of my position." He was coming out of the corral.

"That's not the kind of language the boss's daughter is supposed to use," he answered. "Ladies who go to finishing schools don't use it."

She laughed, the tones clear and bell-like, her young breasts beneath the man's flannel shirt rising high. He could see the healthy curve of her neck and throat, soft and alluring.

"But perhaps I'm not a lady, Jude. And do you know what: I shudder to think what my friends will say when they arrive for the house warming party and barbecue we're giving when the new place is done. Pa says I've lost that thin skin of 'culture' they put on me back East and am just another Texas ranch gal."

"You mentioned friends. Who are they?"

She got down off the fence and dropped in beside him as he carried his gear toward the saddle shed. It was nearly noon and time to eat. She shot him a side glance from her green eyes.

"Do you know something? In all the months on this ranch you've never called me by my name."

"I seem to recollect," he said, "that you gave orders for all the hands to address you as 'Miss Travers.'"

"Oh, that!" She laughed again. She seemed to be in a capricious mood today. "That went along with the thin skin of 'culture.' I guess I had some pretty hifalutin' ideas when I got back. But I have changed, haven't I?"

He slung the saddle over the saddle rack beneath the shed and put the bridle over the horn. He began divesting himself of his chaps. The chaps and the rest of his gear wasn't new anymore. The saddle was shiny from use and of a much darker hue now and his chaps showed the marks of a thousand thorns and limbs having struck at them.

"I'd say quite a bit," Jude admitted.

"Well, *thank you!*" she said in pretended indignation. "But I have changed. I ride with the men, I eat in the bunkhouse once in a while to get a change from Jessie's cooking, and I dance with all of the hands at the dances in town. That is, all except one. You've never asked me to dance with you, Jude. Last Saturday night you ignored me completely, though I noticed you were doing all right with some of those nester girls."

"They're not much nesters anymore; they're small time cowmen."

"But you still didn't dance with me. But I'll bet if that Edwina Cochran had been there you'd have danced with her—several times."

"I probably would have, Miss Travers."

"Call me Nell, Jude. You like her a lot in spite of her being Blackie's girl, don't you?"

THAT one left her wide open for a shot straight from the shoulder, and because he was getting a little annoyed with her, he took it. "I noticed that you let him make over you that night the two of you were sitting on the wagon tongue. You knew Edwina was his girl then."

She tossed her russet locks. She was getting angry too, but he somehow got the impression that she was enjoying the joust. A rooster crowed in the distance. A buzzard circled lazily in the sky on black wings. Smoke trailed up from the dining dugout stove pipe, and from the direction of Pokey and Ike's shack came mutterings punctuated by pungent oaths in the language of the sea.

She stopped and faced him. "Blackie needed to be given his come uppence. He thinks that just because he's so handsome and is a sheriff's deputy now that all the girls fall in love with him. So I let him kiss me a couple of times and then stopped him cold. That's all there was to it—but you still like Edwina."

"Very much, Miss Travers."

"Stop that!" she said, plainly angry now. "I told you to call me Nell, Jude. But I still don't like Edwina Cochran because she's Blackie's girl, and I still think you like her a lot better than you let on."

The muttered oaths were still coming from the shack where the two cooks slept. Ike's head appeared in the doorway, beckoned to Jude, and then disappeared once more.

A hoarse, raucous voice said plainly, "Go to hell, you swab." It sounded as though Admiral Big Bottom was on the prod.

"I have respect for her," Jude said. "She fell in love with a man and proved it by coming West with him. She sacrificed her reputation in Alden because she loved a man and believed in him. Your mother married Mr. Travers when he had nothing. She sacrificed four years of her life while he fought through the war. She waited in Texas and made more sacrifices in hard work and patience while he got his spread going. What Edwina did because she loved Blackie is pretty small compared to what your mother did."

He was tired of the argument. He wished that she'd go on up to the ranch house. She was lovely and getting more so every day. She was one of the outfit now and that made him respect her more. But she was still Harry Travers' daughter and he was just one of the hands.

He changed the subject. "You mentioned these friends coming out from the East. Who are they?"

"Well, there's Helen Borden. Her father is some kind of a banker or railroad president or something. Then there's Julie Stanton. I don't know what her father is, but he's terribly rich. Julie wrote me that they all wanted to come west for a few months and see what this country is like. So when I sent an invitation for them all to come and stay for a few weeks and see what life was like on a Texas ranch they all decided to make the trip. They'll be here in time for the house warming."

"Well, I hope you have a good time, Miss Travers," he said, and it was dismissal.

"Don't you dare use that name again, Jude Gordon, or I'll make Pa fire you!" she flared at him and went toward the house.

Ike's head was poking itself out of the doorway again, a tattooed arm beckoning. Jude went in. It was dim inside after the bright glare of the noonday sun. A fly buzzed futiley and stupidly at a dirty window pane, three feet from the open doorway. The Admiral wasn't on his perch. He was over in the middle of Ike's bunk, stalking up and down and making croaking sounds.

Ike swore again and pointed at a small white object.

Admiral Big Bottom, after four years of profane celibacy with Ike, had just laid an egg.

"Ahoy, mate!" the Admiral squawked.

"Look at it!" Ike almost roared. "For four years I took him—I mean her—into the best grog shops in the country and paid for the best. A tough old sea going Admiral, he was. Drink his likker with the best of 'em. An' now the swab has to go and lay an *egg! A she-Admiral,* she is. I never heard such bilge in me life!"

They went toward the dugout with Iike still swearing disgustedly. He knew what he was in for at the hands of the men. They'd never let him forget. Ike was going to find life very miserable around the T4 until the joke wore thin.

Jude went in and ate as the rest of the outfit began trickling in and unsaddling. After dinner Nute Shelby called him over.

Jude and Cic were to saddle up, load their warbags and tarps on pack horses, and head north for a line camp at the tip of Hensen's range, to winter and batch there.

Travers had, the day before, bought the H Bar holdings.

CHAPTER XXVI

JUDE and Cic jogged into town around 3 o'clock that afternoon. They would stop in the store and buy heavy coats and winter underwear and other necessities for a winter alone in a line camp. Shelby had chosen wisely in having the older man accompany Jude. Putting two men of the same age and temperament in a cabin for an entire winter was often tantamount to inviting death to one of them. "Cabin fever" was a tough problem for any foreman. Two men couped up together night after night get tired of the other's tall tales, repeated over and over again, the drone of the same voice, the shape of his head even. Many a pair had come out in the spring, once former close friends and now bitter enemies; and fights with fists were not uncommon.

Anything to break the monotony of long nights when the wind howled down across the flats and the horses stood humped up under the protection of their sheds.

The two punchers went in through the back of Sol's store to start buying, and Jude saw Edwina. She was purchasing a bolt of goods for dresses. She stood in more solidly with the womenfolk of the town now, because her dresses had proved a stronger lure than reticence to patronize her because of her reputation. Only one woman had carefully avoided the place: Nell Travers.

She gave Jude a brief nod of greeting. There was neither friendliness nor hostility in it. He went over, removing his hat.

"How are you, Jude?" she asked in a matter-of-fact tone.

It made him decidedly uncomfortable. "All right, I guess. Cic and me just stopped in to buy a few things for the cold weather. We're heading for a line camp about thirty miles north."

"Then you won't be back until spring?"

"I guess not. About March or April, I think. In time for the calf roundup."

"In that case, I'll wish you luck. Take good care of yourself."

She turned to the girl and began examining the goods again. Jude went over to where Cic was talking with Sol's son, a slim young man in his twenties. Like his father, he wore spectacles.

A wagon rattled by in the street outside and the buzz of men's talk filled the store. Nesters. They wore cowmen's boots and big hats now, bought from Sol. Cic and Jude made their purchases—on credit until spring—, bought two quarts of whiskey at the saloon next door, and rode out of town.

They wintered on the far tip of the former Hensen range, in a shack that was divided into two rooms, one for bunking and one for cooking. The shack was on a bare knoll, with the sheds for the horses down below in the lee of the crest. The horses would need all the protection they could get when the wind howled and the sleet came driving down slantingly.

In a matter of days they settled into line camp life. It was a matter of getting up after daylight, feeding the horses and cooking breakfast, and then bundling up for the long cold ride to push all the Hensen stuff south and to prevent nester stuff, driven by the cold, from drifting over onto T4 range. Now and then Jude met hard-eyed men on the same job, their small holdings visible far to the north; men who rode by cautiously at a distance of a hundred yards, eyeing the T4 man warily, and sometimes lifting a gloved hand in curt greeting. Once a month Joe, bundled up in the bitter cold, drove by in the bedroll wagon, loaded down with supplies for the camps. He usually stayed overnight, exchanged and passed along the latest gossip, and disappeared over the horizon the next morning.

Things were going pretty good at the home ranch and in town. The winter range was in pretty good shape so far, the cattle holding up well. Travers figgered that, with the addition of Hensen's spread to his holdings, he could put four thousand head up the trail next summer. The furniture for the new house was being freighted in by two big wagons and everybody was looking forward to the barbecue and general celebration when the weather warmed up a bit.

Christmas came, in the face of a howling norther, with rain that turned into burst of hail that rattled off the walls and roof of the cabin. Cic cut a cedar bush and clumsily stuck three candles on it, and then broke out a bottle of whiskey he had been hoarding for months. They sang Christmas carols and wound up by getting pretty drunk. The circuit judge came by Alden, tried a Mexican, and turned him loose. Self defense. No witnesses to prove otherwise.

It was a good winter, Jude thought. He lay in his bunk nights and listened to the wind and thought about Edwina and Nell

Travers and what they were doing. He began to get ideas that perhaps he might drift. This was in mid-January and it had been a perfect winter so far.

Then things changed and came alive with explosions that were to reverberate all over the range. Joe broke the news on one of his monthly trips.

Jim Underhill, the sheriff, had been found two weeks before, up on the edge of the nester country fifteen miles west of Jude's section of the line. He had been dead about a week. A nester had found his horse wandering, half starved and frozen, and back tracked.

The sheriff had been shot through the back with a rifle.

BLACKIE was now acting sheriff and had hired two new deputies. What made it worse, Joe swore profanely, was that they were both nesters.

Jude was genuinely sorry about the death of the sheriff. Underhill had been a good man. He had been pressed into a job he didn't much want, and he had lost his life because of it. Dry gulched.

"So Blackie's gone over to the nesters, eh?" Cic grunted. He reached over and lit a cigarette from the top of the lamp globe on the table. The three of them had just eaten supper and were in the kitchen of the cabin.

"I wouldn't say that," Joe replied. "He said as how he didn't much want the job. But there wasn't anybody else, him bein' the only deputy."

"He coulda hired a couple of good gun packin' *punchers!*" snapped Cic.

"I reckon he could," the limping man agreed. "But what you boys don't realize is that Alden is becoming a nester town. Travers is the only big ranchman who is there, most of the others freightin' from further north an' west. An' these nesters have all got cows now too. I hear that new Cross Eight outfit added four hundred more head."

"Yeah?" grunted Cic narrowly.

"Yep. An' that ain't the worst part. Their surveyors drawed up a line several miles inside what was part of Travers' range juttin' on to Hensen's. An' they bought all thet land legal-like. Owsley—he's the new foreman an' he ain't no nester—though he's got nester punchers—says as how come spring an' his Eight Cross stuff will be headin' right over onto thet new grass. He told Travers plain in Sol's store one day thet he didn't want to see any T4 or H Bar irons on thet grass when they come over with their own stuff."

"What did the boss say?" Jude asked. That disputed land was a part of his assigned line.

The crippled little ex-rider grinned at that one. "Whut would you expect him to say, Jude? He told Owsley an' them four nester punchers with him thet his men would shoot the first cow an' the first rider thet crossed the old boundary."

"Them's our orders?" Cic cut in.

Joe nodded. "I got word fer you two to sorta follow 'em accordin' to how you feel."

"Well, I reckon thet makes it plain enough," the older puncher grunted.

That was the first ominous portent of trouble coming on the range. Joe had said that Texas Rangers were drifting in. They had investigated the death of the sheriff, but by the time they arrived at the spot where the body had been found an overnight rain had obliterated all tracks of the man or men who had dry gulched the officer.

Jude went back to his riding, and the worst part of a bad Texas winter closed down in February. They fought it out, he and Cic, riding when they could and pushing the humped up cattle into draws, trying to hold them against the storm until it abated and then drive them back over into the nesters' holdings. It snowed four inches in late February, followed by another of those miserable driving northers that froze the snow to hard crusted ice, and the effects of it showed on the cattle. Quite a large number of the older, poorer cows froze to death in the draws during those final two nights when Jude and Cic sat humped over the smoking stove in the kitchen and tried to keep warm. They had to use saddle blankets over their tarps that last night to keep warm, and they slept in their clothes.

When the wind died down the following morning and the sun came out warm Jude rode across the white covered land appalled by what he saw in the choked draws. If it had been like that on the south range, down below the home ranch, then Harry Travers certainly wouldn't be putting any four thousand head up the trail next year —or the following. It turned Jude sick to see the dead young calves.

But the weather had given all in that final storm and it began to turn warm. The grass began greening overnight and now it was mud. Jude rode with jerky beef and cold biscuits in his saddle bag and was out all day. He was still leaner than before and his hair was down over his ears in shaggy locks. He and Cic had gotten along swell during the lonely, hard months, though the scar-faced ex-Confederate soldier openly expressed his disgust at the two books Jude had brought from Kansas.

"I cain't make head nor tails of this Shakespeare," he had once exploded. "He don't even write *English!* An' take this dam' fool Hamlet. From what I can git outa it he musta got hit over the head with a whiskey bottle when he was a yearlin' an' got his thinkin' all twisted up. Biggest dam' fool I ever heard of. You go ahead an' read them books all you wants to, Jude. I'll pay a dime fer a good one where this young hero picks up the little girl's dropped purse in the railroad station an' her billionaire father gives him a job as a puncher in the office or ridin' herd on a bell-stack locomotive engine. He gits to be foreman of the company when the old man kicks the bucket, marries the now growed up girl, an' owns the whole outfit. *Thet's* the way I like 'em!"

THEY laughed and joked and played crude tricks on each other and then went out to work the day through, sometimes not getting back until dark. But the nester country to the north of them wasn't such good range and their cattle always appeared to have a penchant for the grass further south. Then it finally dawned on Jude that they were not drifting; they were being driven. The nesters were encroaching. It was deliberate.

Thus it came about that one morning Jude rose two hours earlier than usual. He left Cic sound asleep in his bunk, drank a cup of coffee, and picked up the food he had prepared the night before. He hadn't told Cic what he was going to do. The older man would have insisted on changing places with him. Jude closed the door softly behind him and went down to saddle up. Daylight found him eight miles west of the line cabin. He rode on, topped a ridge, and then he saw them. Three nesters working forty or fifty head of their stuff over onto what had been the old Hensen range. Jude put spurs to his mount and loped forward to the west, the newly risen sun hitting his back.

The three had seen him and then pulled up, as though uncertain. Jude pulled up too, three hundred yards away, his horse blocking them.

"Put 'em back!" he yelled. "Don't let 'em cross."

"This is nester land now, cow punch. They'll cross," came back an answering call.

Jude bent in the saddle and brought up his rifle. It was a .44-40 repeater, Model of 1866. He swung his horse around so that its left side faced the oncoming cows. Coolly he fired. A cow dropped. He dropped two more. A yell went up and a shot banged over his head. He slapped steel to the horse and buck jumped it into an arroyo and then swung down, crawling back to the top of the ridge while he thumbed more shells from his belt into the magazine. But the three riders had disappeared into the brush toward the northern line of where Duck Creek flowed in the distance.

Jude shoved the gun back into its sheath and mounted. He drove the cows back, watched them amble into the brush, and rode on along the line. When he got back that afternoon and told Cic what had occurred the older man was furious. It was the nearest to anger toward Jude that Cic had ever displayed.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he demanded harshly. "You mighta got yourself killed. I'd have gone with you."

"You've got your end of the line to ride, the other direction, Cic," Jude said quietly. "This west end is mine and I'll ride it. I —"

A shadow had darkened the doorway. The man who stood there was about thirty-five years of age. He wore a brown hat, checkered shirt, dark wool pants, and boots that came to the knee, big "ears" flopping at the tops. Jude gave these a cursory glance. It wasn't on either the clothes or the guns the man wore. It was on the keen face and the badge on his shirt. The badge was a pentacle and had the words *Texas Ranger* stamped into it.

"Come in," he invited.

The man came in. He took off his hat,

glancing around the kitchen. "Howdy, boys," he greeted in a soft voice in keeping with his appearance. "I'm Durton. Texas Rangers. Which one of you men were riding the east end of the line from this camp this morning?"

"Him," Cic said belligerently. "Why?"

The Ranger looked at Jude. "You shot some Lazy S cows. Three of them," he said.

Jude nodded. "Three men driving them across over onto our range. I warned them not to. They said it was nester range now. I dropped three head and then ducked when one of them let drive at me with a rifle."

"Hmm. They didn't say anything about thet part of it. But they claim they've bought this range an' are entitled to graze it."

"I've been riding that line nearly every day since last fall," Jude told him quietly. "There were no surveyors on it before I came and there weren't any during the winter. They've supposedly surveyed and bought further west and south of here, toward Cap Rock, where the Cross Eight has set in, but not down here. This is the old Hensen north boundary."

"I saw your trail cut out of the grass during the winter," the Ranger admitted. "And I talked to Hensen before I came up. No surveyors, eh?"

"None," snapped Cic, still belligerent. "Seems to me you put in a purty quick appearance here, Mister, after Jude drove them cows off our range this mornin'. You in with these damned nesters?"

"The Rangers," came the quiet, hard reply, "ain't in with anybody. But there's rumors you've got a range war brewing between Travers and the small cowmen and, mister, that range war just ain't going to take place. That's why we're down here."

"And just how did you git holt of all these 'rumors' you're talkin' about?"

"We had word from the acting sheriff here,' the other explained patiently. "Hepburn. He sent in word to headquarters there was trouble brewing and some of us were sent up." He looked at Jude. "All right, son, there'll be no action taken because of this ruckus this mornin' because the legality of these small cowmen's claims are in doubt. I reckon I'd have done the same thing in your boots if I was back punchin', like I used to do. But just be a little more careful, boys, until this thing is cleared up."

Cic thawed a little and invited him to stay for supper. They had beans with big chunks of fat pork cooked in them, boiled potatoes, canned corn, and some cooked dried fruit, topped off by the inevitable cups of black coffee.

The Ranger rose with a sigh of contentment, pushing back his chair. He rolled a cigarette.

"That was a good meal, boys. Travers seems to feed his hands well." He struck a match on the still warm stove, lit the rolled cigarette, and reached for his hat. "Well, I'll be going. Thanks for the supper."

He rode out, swung aboard his horse, and disappeared into the night along the trail Jude had ridden westward almost every day for months.

Two days later Jude found his body.

CHAPTER XXVII

HE saw the saddled horse first, about 9 o'clock that sunny morning. It was wandering with reins dragging. He rode over and grabbed up the dangling reins, noting the blood stains on the saddle. They were fresh and so were the tracks of the animal. Durton lay less than three hundred yards away, near the lip of a gully.

Jude swung down and looked at the dead man. The Ranger had half rolled over on his side. He hadn't been killed quite instantly. Smoke rose from a fire down below and Jude went down the slippery bank.

It was a branding fire. Of that there could be no doubt. Cow and calf tracks led up over the bank and Jude went for his horse. He mounted and began following them. They led north, straight across the boundary into nester country, as he had known. Jude looked back at the spot where the horse now stood with reins dangling and turned his face to the north. He followed the tracks.

He crossed over and spurred along the trail, for Durton hadn't been dead more than an hour. The dun horse beneath him stretched out a bit further under the rowels while Jude kept a sharp lookout for signs of movements on the skyline. He was in the enemy's domain now.

Presently he pulled up, lipped a ridge cautiously, and saw his quarry. The rustler was a quarter of a mile ahead, driving a cow and calf ahead of him and urging them to greateer speed.

Jude swung to the east, ducked back of a ridge and ran down close to Duck Creek's westward curve, and spurred hard. The soft sand took up the muffled beat of his horse's hoofs. He circled, cut in back of another promontory and swung down with his .44-40 in hand. The rustler rounded the promontory, throwing frightened glances back of him, and then pulled up sharp, fear and amazement on his face.

It was Grady.

"Get 'em up!" snapped Jude. "Up, Grady, or I'll blow you apart. I mean it!"

Grady saw the levelled barrel of the repeater and slowly obeyed, panic in his face. It wasn't a very pretty face. Small sores covered it now. Jude thought of the harridan with her arm around Grady that night in Abilene and stifled a shudder.

"Howdy, Jude," he said in a voice that was half whine. "What you doin' over here in nester country?"

"You know damn well what I'm doing. Drop that gunbelt with your right hand, Grady, and don't make any false moves. Drop it!"

Grady obeyed. Jude's eyes had gone to the cow and calf. It was one of Hensen's H Bar cows but the calf bore a newly burned Eight Cross on its hip, and there was a blue colored cinch ring hooked over the steel horn of Grady's saddle. He'd used the heated cinch ring, holding it between two sticks, to brand the calf until the Ranger had surprised him. The cow either would have been shot or possibly driven further north to have her brand blotted. Jude rode closer.

"Aw, hell, Jude, Travers has got plenty of cows, he won't miss a calf now an' then," Grady protested.

"He's missing plenty of them, but that's not what counts. I found the man you shot, Grady. Now round up that cow and calf and get 'em started south. You're not packing a saddle gun, and if you try to make a break for it I'll drop you out of the saddle. Get going!"

They got going, driving the rustled cow and calf before them, with Jude looking back over his shoulder. He had the evidence that would help to strengthen Travers' case against the nesters, and he didn't want a fight on his hands. They crossed back over the boundary and came to where the dead man lay. And about that time Cic came loping up.

"Just a hunch I had," he said quietly. "Just a hunch, Jude. Figgered you might get a shot in the back. Hello, Grady. So you're in with the nester pool now, eh?"

Grady maintained a sullen silence while Jude explained what had happened.

"Now," Cic grunted angrily, "I know who rattled thet slicker thet night up on Gramma Crick in Kansas an' shot Tolson in the dark. The Pool had some of their men waiting for whatever we lost in the stampede."

Grady said hoarsely, "Cic, I swear I didn't stampede that herd that night. I swear it! I was clean over on the other side of the herd an' I think I kin prove it. I was tryin' to turn 'em. One of the other boys was with me close by, an' if he ain't drifted he'll tell you the same. I didn't rattle that slicker. It was somebody else. I was doin' my best to help out, like as how any good puncher should. I was all for the T4 until Nute fired me in Abilene. Then I come back here all mad at him an' threw in with the nesters."

Something in his frantic words held a ring of truth for Jude. He didn't think that Grady was lying this time. He said, "That'll all come out later, I reckon. Right now we got a dead man on our hands, plus a rustled cow and a branded calf wearing the Eight Cross iron. What do we do now, Cic?"

Cic's eyes glinted as he rubbed the caved in outline of his scarred jaw. "Go in with 'em," he said. "We can make Alden by dark if we push hard enough. I want Blackie an' every dam' Texas Ranger in these parts to see this. Maybe it'll show 'em who's doin' the rustlin an' who's in the right. Let's get Durton's body lashed on his hoss, boys, an' get movin'. The line camp'll wait."

They lashed the dead man face down across his saddle and started driving the cow and calf southward ahead of them. But progress was slow and presently Jude said to Cic, "One of us oughta ride ahead and get Blackie. What do you think, Cic?"

"Good idea. You're lighter'n me, not to speak of bein' a hell of a lot younger. My bones don't take the jolts so good anymore. I'll keep pushin' this cow an' calf directly across country, makin' a bee line for Alden an' takin' care of Grady, the dam' brand burnin' nester!" which in Cic's way of thinking was a lower epithet than calling him a son of a gun. "You burn the breeze on in an' come back with some help. They'll hang Grady for killin' thet Ranger."

"I still didn't stampede that herd," Grady protested, and scratched at one of the sores on his face.

JUDE gave Cic a wave of the hand and turned in the saddle, heading southward. His weight was slightly less than one hundred and fifty pounds and the cow pony beneath him had been loafing for two days. He sent it forward at a long lope that would eat up the miles, loping and jogging it by turns, and now and then stopping to let it blow.

It was drenched with sweat when he finally swung down before Bronson's stable and ordered it rubbed down, watered a bit, led around in a circle for a while to cool off, and then fed. It had been a terrible run; he had got all out of the cow pony that it had to offer.

He walked southward toward the line of saloons, came in between two of them, and turned west toward where the sheriff's office had been. The sign above the clapboard building was gone. A man came along the street and recognized him; it was one of the original Hensen punchers, now on the T4 payroll.

"Yu're thet line rider from over on Duck Creek, ain't yu?" he asked.

Jude nodded. The newly finished courthouse gleamed red in the sun and so did the new stone jail.

"Seen the sheriff around?" Jude asked.

"Blackie? Sure. Just come from the courthouse. Thet's his office on this corner. Things kinda changed around here since you left, boy. We're growin' up."

"Thanks," Jude said brusquely, and left him. He went across into a big hallway running north and south through the building, with doors leading off on each side. One said *County Treasurer* in bold letters painted on its grey color. Another said *County Attorney. County Clerk. County Judge.*

One Jude hadn't noticed said *County Sheriff.*

No doubt about it. Alden was coming up. The country was getting settled—with nesters—and was growing up. Jude pushed into the sheriff's office.

He saw three men. One of them was Blackie. The two others were Texas Rangers. Blackie dropped his feet from his desk, a look of pleasant surprise coming over his handsome face.

"Well, look who's here," he greeted, getting up and extending a hand. "Hello, Jude, boy, I'm glad to see you. Thought it would be another couple of weeks before Harry relieved his winter line riders. You're early."

Jude shook hands with him, unaware of his wild appearance. He was all cow country now. All traces of the Kansas farmer had disappeared. He wore boots and chaps and a pistol and he looked the part of which he was: a wild line rider coming in from a winter in a line camp.

Blackie introduced him to the Rangers. Jude heard names he didn't remember. They were quiet and efficient looking. One of them had a hard face. Probably an ex-outlaw. The Texas Rangers were taking a lot of outlaws into service now. They were hard, deadly men; they knew who was riding the dim trails where; and this knowledge, plus their loyalty to the badge they wore, made them invaluable. They were doing a good job helping to clean up the bad element in Texas.

"Travers didn't relieve Cic and me," Jude said.

The sun shone through the big window. The black door of a big vault was slightly open. Boots clumped along the ten foot wide corridor and turned in at the Treasurer's office. Somebody paying their taxes.

"Trouble?" asked one of the Rangers; the younger one.

"Trouble," Jude said.

"We got a man up that way. Durton. You seen him?"

"Cic's bringing him in," Jude answered. "Seems as though he caught one of the nesters branding a calf and got shot." He looked at Blackie. "It's Grady. I caught him red-handed. Cic's bringing *him* in too. I came on ahead to get you."

Blackie was eyeing him. "Grady? Good God! What's he doing back in this country after Nute fired him in Abilene?"

"It kind of looks like he's rustling cattle."

"A rebranded calf, you say? What brand?"

"Eight Cross on the calf. H Bar on the cow. I got the drop on him and back tracked to where he had killed Durton. Cic came up and started bring them in—Durton's body, the two critters, and Grady. Grady swears it wasn't him that stampeded the herd that night up on Gramma Creek, in Kansas. I believe what he said."

THE two Texas Rangers looked at each other. "I reckon we better get rolling," the hard faced one said. "Durton, you say? So they got him? He was a good officer."

Then Travers came in the doorway and stopped to look at Jude. More crisp explanations were necessary. Blackie was buckling on his guns and picking up a pair of handcuffs.

"I reckon I'll go with you, boys," Travers said. "This concerns me."

"What do you Rangers think now?" the cattleman asked, brusquely.

"We don't think," came the reply from the hard-faced man. "We just act."

The sun splayed down. A rig rattled along the north side of the square, the two women occupants discreetly turning their faces away from the line of saloons. From down in the flats north of town came the shrill barking of prairie dogs, sitting on the edges of the high mounded holes. Jude once had had a pet prairie dog. They didn't tame very easily.

He said, "My horse is tired and I'm hungry. You should meet Cic not more than seven or eight miles out, in a bee line between here and the Hensen ranch. You need me to go with you?"

"No," Blackie replied. "We'll find them. You wait in town and get some rest and we'll be in before sundown."

Jude watched them go, the two Rangers to mount their horses, Travers to get his from in back of Sol's store, Blackie to pick up one from Bronson's livery. Jude went across the square to a restaurant, two doors down from Sol's store, the saloon in between them. He didn't feel like a drink. He ate and then got a haircut and lounged around town, his eyes continually going to the mesquite covered flats to the north. He was waiting for the reappearance of the four men and what Cic was bringing.

He wanted to go see Edwina, but some instinct kept him from doing so. He carefully avoided that section of the street where her shop was located.

Five men came in at about an hour before sundown. The two lawmen, the sheriff, Travers, and Grady. Grady wore a pair of handcuffs now. He was a badly frightened puncher. Jude was at the Bronson livery corral when they drove in the cow and calf, each wearing different brands. The cow was angry and the calf was hungry. It went for its mother and began sucking, the newly burned brand on its hip showing up plainly. Jude saw the grim look on Blackie's face as he and the two Rangers took the frightened Grady over to the new jail, also built of red sandstone, and disappeared inside. They came out again, swinging shut the iron door. Travers hadn't accompanied them. He had put away his horse in the livery, exchanged it for a borrowed fresh one to make the return ride to the ranch, and now he rode to where Jude and Cic stood alone on the boardwalk. They had met there. Cic also hadn't accompanied the three officers to the jail.

"Here comes the boss," the older man said.

"How's he take it?" Jude asked.

"He made the most of it. He lit into them Rangers like you never saw before. Told 'em off plenty about nester rustlin'. They didn't say much. I see 'em comin' back from the jail with Durton still strapped over the saddle. I reckon they'll bury him here."

"I guess," Jude answered, and then Travers rode up.

Little knots of men were clustered on corners. Nester women came out of the store and stood looking. A man wearing a bartender's apron stood on the boardwalk on the north side of the square, staring.

Travers reined up. He looked down at the two T4 men. "I'll send a couple more of the boys up to the camp to take over," he said. "You two can come on back to the ranch. Want to stay in town tonight and get the winter fuzz outa your hair?"

"Sounds good," Jude replied.

"This is a big town fer a pilgrim from a winter line camp but I'll try to make out," Cic answered.

" All right. Stay in and kick up your heels. But we've got work to do and visitors coming to the ranch. Somebody'll have to meet 'em. See you boys at the ranch."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THEY went over to the hotel and got rooms. Joe was due at the line camp in a day or so with his wagon and would bring back their tarps and other stuff to the ranch. Cic and Jude went out for a couple of drinks before eating. Somebody else's cooking would taste wonderful after eating their own for several months. The bar next to Sol's big store was pretty well filled with men, bellied up along the forty foot length against the west wall.

"Nesters," grunted Cic in an aside and spat.

Men looked at them and either stared or silently turned away. Others looked coldly and then resumed conversation, ignoring them. Not much doubt about it: Alden was becoming a nester town. They were the only two regular punchers in the place, though most of the other patrons wore boots and spurs and Stetsons.

One of them Jude recognized. He was a man with a short cut yellow beard, the hair trimmed spade-like across the bottom of his chin. The man was big, hard-eyed, belligerent looking.

"What'll it be, boys?" the bartender asked.

"Rye," Cic said. "I got to cut the taste outa my mouth."

"It looks like," a voice said distinctly and sneeringly, "that a small cowman caint come in an' have a drink anymore without the place bein' smelled up with mesquite an' horse sweat an' horse dung. Somebody orta open the window an' let out the smell."

Cic turned slowly, eyeing the speaker. It was the man with the yellow spade-shaped beard. Jude recognized a second with him too. He was pretty sure the third made up the trio who had driven the cows across the old Hensen north boundary that other morning.

It got a dead quiet in the room. The checker games stopped and so did the poker sessions. The drinkers froze for just a moment and then, like quiet shadows, drifted away. The bar was bare except for a line of glasses containing unfinished drinks and five men. Jude and Cic at one end and the three nesters at the other. The bartender brought the drinks. His hands were trembling as he placed bottle and glasses on the bar.

Jude reached into a shirt pocket, where he happened to have some change. He used his left hand. The right lay close to the butt of his six shooter. Cic picked up the bottle and poured and *his* hands weren't trembling. He poured for them both and then looked at Jude, grinning with saturnine humor.

"It's plumb awful what a winter in a line camp will do for a feller," he said. "He gits outa touch with civilization. He fergits things. Now you take me: I ain't heard hooman voices in so long I've sorta forgot what they sound like. I thought fer a minute I heard somebody speak, but I recognize it now. It was one of the town jackasses out in the alley, a-brayin' an' a-hee-hawin'. It wasn't a hooman at all." He drank with a backward flick of his head and put the empty glass down, pouring another after he wiped his lips with his sleeve. "Sure cuts the bad taste an' sound outa a man," he remarked.

"Was you the fellers brought in thet ranger this mawnin'?" Yellow Beard asked sarcastically.

Cic looked at the bartender. "It's thet jackass again," he complained. "A-brayin' an' a-hee-hawin'. Cain't you go out in the alley an' chase him away, Johnny? I been up in a line camp so long I ain't what I used to be. My nerves is plumb tender an' my hearin' is plumb sensitive. Tell you what, Johnny," to the rigid, frozen faced barkeep. "I'll loan you my rope. You double it an' go out an' bust him on the rump an' chase him up back of Sol's store. Sol's a purty kind hearted feller. He's even kind to nesters. You tell him I said give this burro a bale of hay an' I'll pay fer it. I'll bet he's been so hongry fer a real good meal of hay thet he's been forced to eat T4 *beef* to keep alive."

There could have been no more direct insult and every man in the room knew it. A man cleared his throat uneasily and Jude's cold eyes flicked to him, flicked back to Yellow Beard's sneering face. The teeth, as yellow as the beard, showed through the hair about his lips in a brittle grin.

He switched his attention to Jude. Perhaps he was stalling. Perhaps he was waiting, taking his time; baiting him because there were three of them to the two T4 punchers.

"How's the cow shootin' business these days?" Yellow Beard inquired blandly.

"Not very good," Jude answered quietly. "I had plenty of chances but I hate to shoot our own stuff.'

"Was yuh very upset over them three pore critters yuh downed?"

"I was more upset over that try you made at me with a rifle. You ought to spend some of that beef money buying some cartridges and practicing."

"I got plenty of cartridges."

"Then," jeered Cic, "why don't you use 'em an' —"

It happened then. Jude had caught the downward jerk of the yellow bearded man's shoulder. Two six shooters came up over the bar almost simultaneously. The nester's gun roared and Cic grabbed frantically at the bar as Jude's own gun smashed back in recoil against his palm. He drove a .44 slug straight into the beard, shot the second man, and killed the third as the nester fired wildly. Three bodies thudded to the floor and Jude grabbed out with his left arm, Cic's weight sinking into it. Cic was grabbing at the bar with his right hand; fumblingly.

"Don't move!" Jude snarled, his gun covering the others. "I'll kill the first man who makes a move."

HE STOOD flaming faced, the smoking six shooter in his right hand, He pushed Cic over to rest his weight against the bar and Cic fumbled for the bottle. Red was beginning to stain the left shoulder of his shirt.

"What I need is a drink," he mumbled. "Johnny, ain't you got no manners?" His gun was still in its sheath. The nester with the beard had shot without warning.

The heavy sounds of the six shooters—four shots—had blasted out through the open doors and into the town. Jude heard yells and running feet. Men began to pour in. The first three in were Blackie and the two Texas Rangers.

Jude was still supporting Cic's sagging figure. Cic was still mumbling and trying to hold onto the edge of the bar.

Three dead men lay on the floor, one of them still twitching. Red smeared into the sawdust.

"Put that gun down!" Blackie roared at Jude.

"I'll put it down when those nesters get their hands in sight."

"I said put it down!"

"Keep out of line of fire, Blackie," Jude said tonelessly. "They got Cic without warning. His gun is still in the sheath. Theirs are on the floor."

"Here, son," the older Ranger with the hard face interrupted. "Let me have him."

He hauled Cic over to a table and sat him down in a chair. Cic fell forward across the green top, face resting in his crossed elbows, as though asleep.

Slowly Jude sheathed the six shooter. Blackie was staring at him. He asked, "What happened?"

Jude jerked his head toward the barkeep. His flaming young eyes were still on the frozen men at the tables.

"Ask him. Tell him, Johnny. Tell him exactly what happened."

The barkeep told them. "Porter," he finished up, nodding toward the yellow bearded man on the floor, "jerked his gun first and shot Cic an' was linin' at Jude when Jude got 'im. The other two drawed —their guns are clear of the sheaths an' on the floor—but Jude killed the three of 'em with three shots. He had that gun out so fast I hardly seen it. Whew! I'm sure glad you fellers come in."

Blackie looked at Jude, who still stood by the bar. He saw a young face that was pale but containing no fear. Six men now. Six men gone out of the nester pool. And those three guns on the floor, Cic's gun still in its sheath—

Blackie looked at the rangers and Jude saw uncertainty in his eyes. Blackie was thinking in this moment that Jude had to go. Give this quiet-eyed young ex-farmer time and he'd wipe out the pool.

The younger of the rangers had stepped forward, looking down at the three dead men. He bent and picked up Porter's gun, examining it.

"One shot fired," he said. "Thet was the one thet got that other puncher whose gun is still in the sheath. The others didn't shoot?" he asked the barkeep.

"They didn't have time," Johnny answered. "Cornell was drawing when Jude got him. Broden's gun was up over the bar when he got it square in the face."

"Well, Blackie?" queried the hard faced Ranger.

"What do you think?" Blackie returned. "Looks like I'll have to arrest Jude."

"Arrest, hell! It was self defense—and ain't you kind of forgettin' that he brought in the man who killed Durton? This young puncher got the rustler who shot Durton when he surprised him rustlin' a cow and calf."

"All right." Blackie looked at Jude. "You're in the clear, Jude. But you're doing all right for yourself. You've got six notches on your gun. That's a hell of a lot of men for a puncher not turned twenty yet. But as acting sheriff I warn you, Jude: if this keeps up, I'll have to bring you in one of these days."

"We better get a doctor for Cic," was the quiet reply. "He's bleeding badly."

"I'll get one," one of the rangers said. And to Jude: "Son, we can use a man like you before you throw a gun at the wrong time an' end up as a desperado. It'll happen sooner or later if you keep this up. No wild shooting cow puncher can last. He either goes to boothill or he hangs. It's better to be on the side of the law than on the other side. I'll talk to you again one day soon."

It was the hard faced older man. And Jude thought he knew. This man had been an outlaw before he had come over to become a lawman.

"Thanks," Jude said, and went to Cic.

Somebody pushed through the crowd jammed around the front door. Two women. They were Edwina and Nell Travers.

"Oh, Jude, I'm sorry," Edwina cried out.

"It's all right,' he answered.

NELL had gone to Cic, still down over the table, his face buried in his arms. He was unconscious from the shock of the big bullet. She displayed surprising strength and initiative. She got him in her arms, pulled him from the chair, and stretched him out on the floor, unbuttoning his blood soaked shirt. "Get me some clean bar towels,' she called out.

She was still working over him when the doctor arrived. A borrowed knife had cut away the shirt. Cic lay with his chest bared, red trying to ooze through the pads she had put on.

The doctor—his name was Vogel—got busy. He strapped Cic's chest tight to stop the flow of blood and rose.

"One of you men go get a light wagon and we'll take him down to my house," he commanded. "I'll have to probe for the bullet and remove it. It missed the lung. Lodged above it." He went over to the bar and poured himself a drink into one of the glasses. He turned and surveyed the crowd, a disillusioned looking man of about forty-five. "Gun fighters," he said. "Wild, gun throwing cow punchers who pack six shooters and kill at the slightest provocation. I served four years as a surgeon in the Confederate Armies. I patched them up, I amputated, I stood over them and watched them die, some of them boys not more than fifteen, their guts blown out by rifle and pistol balls. Three hundred and fifty thousand of them from the south. Two hundred and fifty thousand more from the north. And for what? For the survivors to come out here, guns still on their hips, rifles in their hands, and continue the slaughter. I wish to God I had become either an athiest or a minister—anything but a doctor. Man's inhumanity to man." He poured himself another drink. On the floor Cic lay still, the bandages glaringly out of place in the saloon, faint groans coming from deep within his tortured chest.

Jude found himself out into the clean air of the street. He found the two women walking alongside him. None of them spoke. Sol stood in the doorway of his store and looked and said nothing. He shook his head sadly after they had passed and went back inside. Riders clattered up the street and went to the saloon where the crowd still were gathered. The red stones of the new courthouse shone, bright and new, not yet beaten to a color change by the elements. The jail, where Grady was confined in a cell, looked grim with its barred windows, Nell broke the silence immediately.

"I came in to get fitted for some new dresses for the house warming," she said to Jude. "We're making the final ones tonight. Edwina and I have become good friends since you left last fall."

"I'm glad," Jude said. And to Edwina: "Are you coming out for the celebration?"

Nell laughed. "Of course she is, silly! So is Sol and everybody else in town. Well, a lot of them."

"When is it to be?"

"Saturday night—two days from now. The guests from the East will be in on the stage Saturday morning. Pa's already had the barbecue pits dug and is going to butcher a steer. The house is all finished."

They stopped in front of Edwina's place and the two women went in. Jude walked on toward the hotel. He wasn't hungry anymore. All he wanted to do was to go up to his room and lie down. He saw a man across the street, at the hitch rack in front of the dancehall; a pot bellied man who wore two guns.

Red Tolliver.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE hotel was a box-shaped clapboard affair two stories high, without a false front. Edwina's rooms were in the right hand corner, Blackie's across the hall. Further back Jude lay in another. The two Texas Rangers shared one on the left rear corner. Four rooms; and in them events were shaping the lives of their occupants, each seemingly to push out in different directions, in hopes and dreams and plans and ambitions, yet each strangely tied in with the others.

Darkness had come down. The town was quiet except for the barking of a dog playing a game of bluff with distant coyotes yapping on the prairie. Sol's big store was locked, dark, silent. Only the saloons were lit. They were doing a desultory business. Men in them talked quietly, discussing the gun fight that had taken place a few hours earlier.

Nell was sharing the room with Edwina. They had finished with the fittings. Nell would return to the ranch the following morning. She sat before Edwina's bureau mirror, combing her lovely russet locks, dressed only in a petticoat. Her bare arms and shoulders shone soft and rounded in the light of the lamp beside her, her young breasts half bared. She turned on the stool.

"You know something, Edwina?" she called.

Edwina came in from the other room, her golden head shining in the light. She too had removed her dress. They were getting ready to retire. Nell's riding skirt and man's shirt hung in a closet, her boots on the floor beside the bed. She was in her stocking feet.

"That's a vague question, Nell?" she smiled.

"I think Blackie's really in love with you."

"Do you, dear?"

"I really do," Nell declared. "He pays me compliments in that gallant way of his. Every time he meets me it's always the same. He tells me how beautiful I am and how lucky some man will be when he marries me. But there's something in his eyes I don't like."

"Perhaps it's what you'd call a shallow love, Nell. Like the bitter one I went through."

"Perhaps." There were few secrets between them now. At least on the surface. The ex-singer had never tried to hide the fact that she had been in love with Blackie. It hardly would have been worth the attempt in view of the fact that she had come with on the stage from Abilene. "But there's something in the way he looks at me that I don't like," Nell finished.

"You mean he might want to make love to you?" Edwina smiled.

"No, dear. He's too . . . well, too calculating. I almost feel I've got dollar signs all over me when Backie is looking me over and paying such nice compliments. I don't think it's real love. You know, Edwina, I envy you."

Edwina was on the edge of the bed, removing her stockings. "Why?" she asked.

"You won't get mad if I tell you?"

"Of course not."

"It's because you've known what *real* love is. I've often wondered what it would be like to be in a man's arms in the darkness—somebody you really cared for. I wouldn't care if he didn't have any money or was handsome or anything else, just as long as I loved him. You've been through that and I envy you. I guess I'm pretty ignorant in a lot of ways," she finished, laughing. "But I'll bet I'd love him to death."

"It is a wonderful thing, Nell," the older woman replied. "You meet somebody like I met Blackie. There's something about him that makes you forget everything except that you want to be with him every minute. You feel his arms around you and let him kiss you and the world becomes a secondary place where time means nothing. It's just the present moment that counts."

"Gee, I'd like that! You know something: I'd give anything if Jude would try to make love to me." She twisted around on the stool to face Edwina. Her eyes were alight. "First, I'd flirt with him a little. Then I'd push him off and pretend to be indignant when he tried to kiss me. Then I'd go over against him so he could smell the perfume in my hair. After that . . . well, I just don't know," she giggled.

Edwina smiled at the younger woman. "After that, Nell, would come the possible disillusionment that I suffered. You love a man, you break all the rules that your common sense says you shouldn't break, and then one day you wake up to the realization that he doesn't love you as you wanted to be loved. Don't ever make the mistake that I made, dear. The knife goes too deep

. . . and when it's twisted it hurts. It hurts all the harder when you realize that someone you've placed your trust in isn't what you thought and believed."

"I'll bet Jude would never be that way."

"No," and Edwina's voice was barely audible, "I don't think Jude would. Jude's got character." She was remembering the night last fall when he had intruded right as Blackie slapped her. She was remembering the flame in his eyes at Blackie—hidden, Jude thought—but not from her. The kind of flame that would have lashed out into gunfire had not Blackie's smooth laughter averted it. Nor would she ever forget the own hidden, inner flame that had possessed her when she had taken his face between her hands and kissed him and said, "Come to me, Jude." Something she hadn't been able to control had caused her to do it. And she might as well face the fact: she was in love with Jude. Her heart and her soul and her body was crying out for him, she loved him that much.

She, Edwina Cochran, who had come in on the stage with Blackie and was recognized as his "woman."

Edwina lay with the covers over her, on her back, looking up into the darkness. The hotel was quiet.

"I can't really talk, Nell. I told you that love could be shallow. Blackie's was."

"Not anymore. He loves you. I know," Nell insisted.

"He loves me because I'm not his girl anymore. As long as I was he took me for granted. When I finally saw through him and broke away, and he realized he had lost me, he came back. Men always do when they lose a woman."

Nell snuggled down against a pillow, burying her lovely young face in its softness. "Well, he still loves you," she said with conviction. "No matter how come or why. And I still envy you. I'm so terribly ignorant about some things, Nell," she finished.

She went to sleep, the pillow Jude's shoulder against her cheek, and Edwina lay staring into the darkness.

A few rooms further back on the same floor Jude had undressed. He was sleepless. He had, instinctively, wanted to clean his gun, but had nothing with which to clean it. He had reloaded it instead. The three empty shells representing three dead men lay in his palm before he tossed them into a gobboon in a corner. He blew out the light and couldn't go to sleep for a long time. There was Edwina, she who aroused such emotions in him. And there was Nell Travers, she who prodded him to anger, yet caused the constriction to hit his stomach when she was near; young, fiery, hot tempered. . . .

He rolled over restlessly and tried to sleep.

In the corner room the older of the two rangers was pulling off his boots. The younger was writing out a report to headquarters in Austin.

"The kid was in the clear," boot dropping to the floor; he reached for the second, tugging. "Three of them and it must hev been fast. Thet boy's got the makings of a good officer or a desperado."

The younger man lifted his face from his reports and a faint grin twisted his mouth. "You oughta know. The only reason you didn't go back to Fort Smith with a U. S. Marshal's handcuffs on was because you broke some kind of record getting friends of yourn in the rangers to get you a badge."

The hard faced man grinned back, stretching out on the bed with his clothes still on. "Mebbe so, mebbe so," he agreed, and then grew serious. "And now we've got a lot of bother on our hands because of thet rustler who shot Durton. He oughta be hung quick."

"He will be," grunted the other.

He went back to his writing and the other rolled over on his back, hands locked behind his head.

IN Blackie's room, across from where the two girls slept, Blackie too was on the bed, stretched out and thinking in the darkness. His first emotions had been fear and then rage at the stupid Grady for the blundering job the ex-T4 puncher had done. Killing the ranger wasn't so bad. Grady would have been arrested and most likely hung anyhow. What enraged Blackie was the fact that the slow-witted puncher had been rustling within plain sight of the boundary and had done such a thing in broad daylight. People took it for granted that the Cross Eight was a nester pool ranch. But these Texas Rangers were sharp characters. They had a way of asking questions and getting information.

And if they ever found out that a burned brand on a stolen calf belonged to the acting sheriff himself. . . .

The door open cautiously without sound and a man slipped into the room.

"That you, Red?" Blackie whispered.

"Yup. I slipped up the back way. Had to see you."

He felt his way forward and sat down. The side of the bed creaked under his more than two hundred pounds.

"What's up?" grunted the sheriff.

"The boys. They're boilin' mad over thet shoot out this afternoon. They're sore at yu. They're sayin' we've lost three more good men outa the pool because yu didn't keep yore promise to bring thet little gun throwin' side winder in with us like you said."

"There's no doubt about it—I underestimated Jude. He was such a green farmer kid and so grateful for me getting him on with the outfit, showing him how to pick his guns, and taking him around Abilene—I even got him a woman nearly as pretty as Edwina to stay with that night we were there. An average kid would have jumped at the chance to come in with us and do as I say. But Jude's not an average puncher."

"You damn well right he ain't!" grunted Red Tolliver's voice from four feet away. "He's a lightning on wheels killer and nuthin' else." He changed the subject. "Yu reckon Grady's goin' to spill his guts when them rangers start questionin' him over in yore office in the mawnin'?"

"I don't think so. When I fed him his supper I had a talk with him. He figures I'll find a way to let him escape."

"Well, yu got the key to the jail."

"So have the rangers. They've got a key that'll fit my office door and the jail keys are on my desk."

Tolliver rose. He was in his sock feet, boots in hand. "Well, I'd better git back to the boys an' tell 'em. Yu oughta be able to figger out somethin' about Grady so's them rangers won't git suspicious about him escapin'."

"I'll try to figure out something, Red."

"And this Jude puncher too?"

"I'll stop Jude at the first opportunity."

"Good. Because if yu don't, I'm goin' to."

Blackie laughed gently, though there was a hard undertone in the sound. "It's your funeral, Red."

Tolliver grunted and went out soundlessly. The door closed behind him. Blackie lay there on the bed, his thoughts strangely not upon the problems at hand. They would come later. His thoughts were upon the two women sleeping just across the hallway. One of them had been his girl and he was determined that she would be again. The other he wanted as his wife. Someday she'd be mistress of that big new twelve room house he was going to visit Saturday night, and Blackie wanted that, too.

The night wore on and the town gradually became quiet, except for the dog still playing dark bluff with the coyotes. The men came up the steps, stumbling drunkenly to their room. One by one the lights of the saloons winked out back of padlocked doors. Bronson closed his livery and went home to his wife.

Alden slept with no movement except for one man.

Red Tolliver had slipped into the livery and cut the throat of the rustled calf and skinned away the newly burned brand put on with a heated cinch ring.

CHAPTER XXX

JUDE was dressed and washing his face in a big white bowl on the bureau the next morning when Blackie came in.

"Morning, Jude."

"Morning."

"How do you feel?"

Jude reached for the towel, drying his face and damp hair. The "smell" that the barber had put on the day before was still evident.

"I didn't sleep very well, Blackie. Kind of tossed around a bit."

Blackie smiled and seated himself on the edge of the rumpled bed. The covers were twisted and slantwise with a corner of a quilt down on the floor. He rolled a morning smoke. Jude bent to the mirror, parting his fine hair.

"I don't blame you. That was some fracas. But I felt the same way first time I ever shot it out with a man. You come on down and have breakfast with me and you'll feel a lot better."

"All right. I've got to get back to the ranch this morning. But you never have said just how many men you have downed, Blackie, and I never asked, though I was always a bit curious." He picked up his hat and then swung the heavy cartridge belt around his slim waist. It slid into place.

They went out.

"Four, Jude," the sheriff replied as they went down the hallway to the steps. "That is, not counting the war."

"I never heard you say anything about the war."

Blackie grinned. "That isn't all, boy, you won't either. It's been over only four years and Texas was on the losing side. You see, Jude, I was a Union spy, working back of the Confederate lines. Spying is not the most honored profession among the men who fought on both sides. But somebody had to do it and I did; and a few times when I was found out I had to protect myself from being blindfolded and shot. That's why I carried a long, razor sharp knife. I used it three times."

They were out in the street now, and Jude again was seeing another side of Blackie's character. He had said it so casually, this cutting of men's throats with a knife. Not many men in Texas cared to use such a weapon, preferring the six shooter or a rifle. Now and then some swaggering badman took a knife in one hand and a corner of his bandana in the other and invited somebody to take hold of the other corner and see who could hang on the longest, but this was mostly bluff. Texans were afraid of cold steel, as were most other people.

The two men went down to a cafe on the north west corner of the square, across from where the old sheriff's office, now deserted, had been. They ate breakfast and Blackie ordered another fixed up to take over to Grady. He carried it out into the street. The town was quiet, only one saloon being open to catch the trade of the men who liked their morning drink. Dr. Vogel came by, on his way to get one.

"Morning," he grunted.

"Morning, Doc," Blackie replied. "How's Cic this morning?"

"Demanding a drink of whiskey," snapped the other. "I was out of it—drank it all up last night and gave him the rest—and now I'm after a pint for him. It's not enough that I patch up their carcasses and remove bullets from their tough hides and get up in the middle of the night to fix broken noses and extract loose teeth knocked out in bar room fights. Almighty God, no! I've got to go pack liquor for them to guzzle in *my* bed. Slept on the couch last night. Didn't sleep worth a damn either!"

He went toward the saloon, scowling, and Blackie laughed. "He's a rough and tough customer himself; as tough as any of the men he patches up. But he's a pretty nice old boy at that. Well, Jude, come on over with me while I give Grady his breakfast. He won't mind and I want you to see the new jail anyhow. Sort of get you acquainted with it beforehand, in case you get into any more of these shooting scrapes."

"Are you keeping him here?" Jude asked as they crossed the street and entered the courthouse yard.

"All depends upon the rangers. They're going to bring him over to the office in a little while and get a written confession out of him, which means that you'd better stay around. It happened in my jurisdiction, but because the murder of one of him to bend the stiffened arms and make him out of here for trial, perhaps in Austin. You'd have to go up as a prosecution witness."

They went into the hallway and Blackie unlocked the door to his office. He came out with a large ring containing several big keys, one of about six inches in length fitting the main door. They headed toward the new jail with its grim looking bars in the windows and Blackie unlocked the heavy door of sheet steel with riveted cross braces. He swung it wide and they entered.

There were three cells and Grady was in the far one. There was no sound of movement and Blackie called out, "All right, Grady. Roll out of that bunk. I've got your breakfast."

He paused and stared; they both stared, for Grady wasn't going to need any breakfast.

He hung by his belt from the side of the cell, his boots dangling three inches above the concrete floor.

"Good God!" Blackie burst out and hurriedly set down the pail. He unlocked the door and swung it wide and they entered.

JUDE followed him in and looked at the hanging rustler. Grady wasn't a very pretty sight. His head tilted over at a sharp right angle. His tongue was protruding with little bubbles of dried froth around the corners of his mouth. The mouth was open, baring his buck teeth, and Grady seemed to be grinning at the wall, except for the protruding tongue. His face had changed color and that made the sores on his coarse face stand out all the more. His hands hung lax at his sides.

"Get him around the legs, Jude, and lift him up," Blackie commanded, and stepped up into the blanketed bunk.

Jude took hold of the body, grasping it around the upper part of the legs. He lifted and Blackie leaned over and loosed the buckle of the belt enough to slip the improvised noose up over the dead brand blotter's head. The body came sagging down, but not bending too far. Rigor mortis had set in. Grady had been dead for several hours.

Jude laid him in the bunk and stretched him out on his back. Some instinct caused their men was involved they might take some kind of an effort to cross them over Grady's chest. A sleeve slid back and Jude saw that the skin around the wrists was chafed. Blackie's sharp eyes saw what was taking place. He looked at Jude.

"Seems to me he mighta changed his mind after looping that belt around his neck and tying the other end around to the top of the cell bars," he said. "I guess that when his wind got shut off he figured suicide wasn't such an easy out from a legal neck breaking after all. I'd say he grabbed hard at the bars and fought to get back on the bunk, but didn't have the strength."

"It looks that way," Jude agreed.

But he noticed that one of Grady's feet was a little longer than the other. The boot was part way slipped off, cocked in place at the ankle. And Jude knew those marks on Grady's wrists were rope marks. His hands had been tied behind him before he was hung.

And then some man who could be nothing short of a fiend had dropped down, locked his arms around Grady's boot tops, and pulled down hard until the rustler strangled.

One of the boots had slipped.

Blackie's voice said, "I don't know whether those two rangers will be mad or glad about Grady hanging himself to keep from making a confession and then being hung on a scaffold. But I guess Grady figured it was outs for him anyhow, and he couldn't stand the thought. So he took off his belt and looped it around his neck, tied the other end to a cell bar, and slid off the bunk. That took more nerve than I thought Grady had. I wouldn't mind getting hit quick and center with a lead ball, I've used a knife enough in defense of my life to be able to take one of them, if it came into my ribs real hard; but to slide off of a bunk and choke to death like he did—that's what I haven't got nerve enough to do."

"Not much more we can do here," Jude answered, leaving the cell. He was a little sick at his stomach. He wanted to get out into the clean air again. "So I think I'll go over to the livery and saddle my horse. He'll be stiff this morning after that run yesterday, but he'll soon get the kinks out. I've got to get back to the ranch."

Blackie was walking toward the front door with him. The cell had been left open, the breakfast pail left on the floor, forgotten; and that ominous belt with its noose pulled through a buckle still dangled from the high bar.

"You'll be riding out with Nell," Blackie said, not bothering to lock the big steel door with its riveted cross braces. "Look here, boy. You take good care of her for your pardner. Remember what I said when we went into the lobby of that hotel in Abilene?"

"You said, 'I want that,' though you didn't say how you wanted it. Legal or like Edwina. I remember."

BLACKIE laughed and clapped him on the back. "Jude, your memory is good. That's exactly what I said. I'm going to marry that girl. She's everything I've always wanted in a woman. All I need is a little time to bring her around to the idea that with Harry owning the biggest ranch in the country and her married to the sheriff—I'm going to run next election and I'm pretty sure of winning—her future will be secure."

They were walking toward the courthouse again. "What about Edwina?" Jude asked.

"I'm no longer interested," Blackie lied. "She's just a woman who was a little too easy. She understood that because, being a singer in a tough rail town dancehall, she's that kind of a woman. I made a mistake in bringing her out here. A moment of weakness. Now she follows me around and complains that I don't love her anymore. I might let her hang around if I was still punching cows. But I'm a lawman now and I've got a reputation to look out for. On top of that I'm crazy about Nell. She's high-spirited and independent. She's far above the average woman in education. So you take good care of her for me, pardner. And I still think you're crazy not to come in here and set in with me, Jude. I can do things for you."

They were at the courthouse now. Jude stopped. The two rangers were coming across from a cafe, toothpicks working between their lips. They had just finished breakfast.

"I can do things for myself, give me time, Blackie. I'll stick to punching cows."

Something like a sigh went out of the sheriff's breast. "All right, Jude. Every man has his own destiny to work out. But I've got to warn you, pardner. I'm a lawman with a job to do. And these shootings are going to stop. If it happens again, I'll have to come after you with a warrant for your arrest."

"Harrison had fired one shot at you before I jerked your gun and got in another lucky shot," was the steady answer. "Tabor and Jergens had Cic with his gunbelt off and making me drop mine. Those three yesterday pulled their guns first. I didn't want any of it to happen but it did. It'll be that way from now on. My gun is for my protection, nothing else. If I ever kill another man any other way, you can have my gun when you serve your warrant. If I don't, you'll have to take it off me."

"You'd throw a gun against me?"

"I wouldn't want to, Blackie."

"Jude, you wouldn't have a chance."

"I guess not. But I'll take it, if it has to happen that way. Well, I guess I'll be going. I'll take good care of Miss Travers. See you at the celebration Saturday night."

He went north toward Bronson's livery, nodding to the two strolling Texas Rangers. He was unaware that Blackie was staring after him; and Jude felt just a bit uneasy. He had heard that the rangers dispensed justice according to their own ways of thinking, and he knew that many of them were ex-outlaws. They knew that Grady was guilty of murdering one of their members, they had been faced with the possible problem of taking him by stage all the way to Austin for trial, and they were busy men working down here to stop a cattle war, with no time for such trivials.

And Blackie had said they had access to the jail keys.

Jude didn't know. That hard faced older one was capable of anything. He only knew that Grady hadn't committed suicide. Grady hadn't had the nerve. The rustling puncher had had his wrists tied behind him and then his own belt looped over his head. Somebody had got hold of his legs around the boot tops and pulled down hard until the puncher strangled.

No, Grady hadn't hung himself.

He had been executed.

Jude got his horse out of the corral, ignoring Bronson's excited comments and gestulations toward the dead calf lying in a corner of a corral, the bare area where the hide had been skinned off showing red in the morning sun. The cow was bawling and sniffing at it, her udder beginning to swell. Jude mounted and rode over into town.

NELL and Edwina came up the street, the former dressed in boots, split riding skirt, shirt, and a light colored hat with a broad brim. Jude reined over alongside the boardwalk. The two women stopped.

"I'm getting ready to go back to the ranch," he said, touching his hat brim. "Blackie said you were going back this morning, Miss Travers, and for me to take good care of you. When are you ready to leave?"

"Oh, he did now, did he?" Nell demanded indignantly. "Just who does that sheriff think he is anyhow?" She tossed her head. It was a gesture of indignation.

"In that case, Miss Travers, I'll go on out and get to work. I saw the Doc this morning. Cic's all right. The bullet's out. I'll tell your father. He'll probably send a wagon in after him."

The two women looked up at him, sitting easily in the saddle, the wildness of the winter in a line camp still not obliterated from him despite the haircut and shave. The pistol that had killed three more men lay in its sheath, another's dark butt jutting up out of a sheath on the left fork of the saddle. Heavy stock of a .44-40 protruding from its saddle scabbard beneath his left saddle skirt.

"So you don't want to ride out home with me?" Nell Travers demanded.

"I didn't say that."

"You acted like it."

"I'd be glad to ride home with you."

"Well . . . then don't sit there like a ninny. Go down to Bronson's and get my horse. I'll wait for you at Edwina's."

They watched him jog off along the street and walked on toward Edwina's shop.

"Gee, Edwina," Nell said. "It's like I told you last night. That crazy gun fighting cowboy gives me the tingles all over. Did you ever feel that way when you looked at a man?"

"Yes, dear."

"Oh, of course. Blackie."

"Yes," Edwina said quietly.

CHAPTER XXXI

HE brought back her horse and picked her up at Edwina's shop, and as they rode down across the flats to Dr. Vogel's modest house the ex-singer, watching them go, realized what a perfectly matched pair they were; she turned seventeen and eager to fall in love and Jude nineteen. And she, Edwina Cochran, an ex-dancehall entertainer older than the both of them.

Cic was half propped up in bed, one side of him white with new bandages, being fed breakfast by the doctor's wife. He listened in amazement as Jude told him of the nights events and how Grady had committed "suicide."

Dr. Vogel was in the kitchen having his own breakfast, a bottle of whiskey beside him and a big black tomcat in his lap.

"Oh, so it's you?" he grunted. "I'm glad you shot straight—or I'd have had to patch up three more of the damned fools. Much prefer to hold up a new born kid and slap life into his back. Sit down," he ordered brusquely.

Jude sat down. "Doc, you're the coroner here, ain't you?" A nod.

"Can I trust you to do something for me on the sly?"

The doctor paused with a fork half way to his mouth and glared. "Put your cards on the table, young man, and stop beating around the bush!" he snapped.

Jude put them on the table, telling of what he had witnessed, and of his suspicions that Grady had been hung.

"I just want to make sure," Jude finished. "When you hold the inquest try to find out, will you? And tell nobody."

"Hmmm. Maybe you're not just a plug-ugly killing cow puncher after all, young fellow. You got a head on you. Who do you think did it?"

"Those two rangers," Jude lied. "He'd killed one of their men and would have hung anyhow, and they couldn't take time to leave here before there's a cattle war brewing. Owsley of the Eight Cross is starting his herds over on the land they bought in a few more days. Travers is going to meet him with guns. Those rangers can't leave. And because they're rangers that's why you've got to turn in a suicide verdict. Nobody could prove anything anyhow."

"Well," growled the doctor, rising, "the thief got what he deserved anyhow. Stay around here until I get back."

It didn't take him long, less than an hour. He came back and bustled into the bedroom where Jude and Nell still chatted with Cic. He glared at Cic and then at his wife. "Not more than three drinks of my whiskey a day," he snarled and looked at Jude.

Jude followed him into the kitchen and Dr. Vogel turned. He nodded. "You're right, youngster. A blow on the back of his head, just enough to stun him. Probably a gun barrel. I noticed those rope marks and the slipped boot too. Suicide. Case closed."

"Thanks, Doc."

Nell came in and they went out and swung up for the ride back to the ranch. They started across the flats and Vogel stuck his head out the front door. "And tell Travers to send in a wagon and get this fool outa here before he eats me out of house and home and drinks up all my whiskey. I want my bed back!" he bawled after them.

They turned and waved and rode on, reaching the ranch shortly before noon. Jude was amazed at the change. The big white house gleamed like a monster glacier from its position on the knoll, sweeping the country in all its grandeur. It was more than two hundred yards from the corrals, so Jude rode over with the girl to the long, porticoed veranda on the east side. He and Nell had gotten along pretty

BARBE
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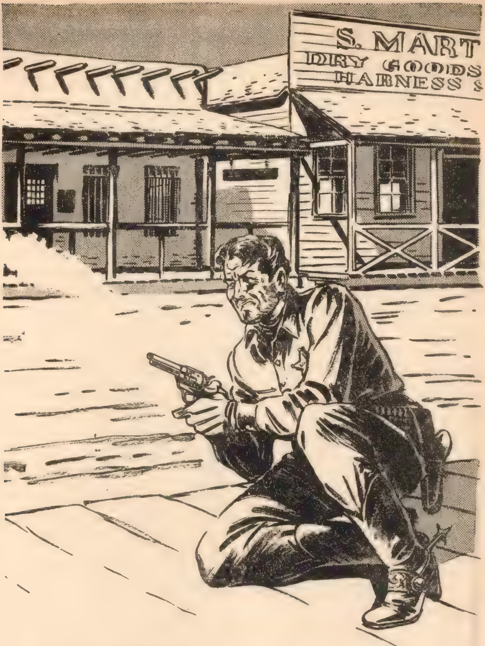

S. MART
DRY GOODS
HARNESS

Jude stood there calmly, his face a blank mask. Mercilessly, he deliberately emptied the sixgun into Blackie well on the ride in. She had chatted gaily about her friendship with Edwina and the plans they had to go riding together when the weather warmed a little more. Now she swung down before the hitch rack her father had put up over her protests and Jude bent for her reins.

"Come on in and look the house over, Jude," she invited.

"Thanks, Miss Travers, but I'd better get on down and unsaddle. I'll look it over Saturday night."

Her eyes almost blazed at him. "All right *Mister* Gordon!" she flared at him. "And when you come in be sure and wipe your boots!" She ducked under the rail and strode angrily across the porch, disappearing through a tall door opened by a new woman servant.

Jude grinned ruefully and led her mount away. "No matter what I say to her, she just naturally goes on the prod," he muttered. "I guess there's something about me that she just don't like."

He met Peanut in the corral as he was unsaddling. The quiet, graved-faced little man came over and stuck out a hand. Word of the shooting already had reached the ranch by some mysterious means.

"Hello, Colonel," Jude greeted. "Glad to see you again."

"Howya you theah, son?" the wrangler replied. "So you done it ag'in?"

"I had to, Colonel. They got Cic first." He didn't want to talk about it, not even with this man he liked so much. Jude changed the subject. "How's old Bugger coming along?" he grinned.

Peanut grinned back. "Well, suh, few weeks ago Bugguh done took Jessie into town and married her. Theh're living in Nute's old house—an' does she beat thet nigguh aroun'! He's about the mos' onhappy nigguh I evah saw in mah life. Nute's up in the old ranchouse with his wife an' kids."

"Poor Bugger. Say, you sure did a nice job on the house, Colonel. Bet you could make money doing it in town all the time. How's things on the ranch?"

"Lotsa changes, son. Some of the old hands drifted durin' the winteh, couple or three moah got fiued. Plenty of new men. All the old han's who went up the trail are still heah, includin' Ike. Thet likkuh drinkin' bird of hisn didn't hatch thet egg. Set on it foah two months an' then he cussed it an' kicked it out on the floah. Ike was some riled, ah reckon."

They both laughed and went on up to the bunkhouse.

TRAVERS sent a wagon after Cic, the wounded puncher swearing he wasn't going to miss any celebration where there was a barrel of free whiskey handy. They brought him home—to Doctor Vogel's openly expressed relief—and Cic, lounging in a bunk, had to tell over and over again about the fight in which Jude had killed the three nesters; and because Jude had saved his life the story lost nothing with the telling.

Saturday morning found a group of people on the porch of Sol's store, watching the stage come in. It was loaded to overflowing with very tired and bedraggled easterners who had ridden all night. Jude, lounging against the wall of the store, waited. He smoked a cigarette, hat on the back of his head, right hip with the pistol thrust out, a thumb hooked in the cartridge belt. He heard a chorus of girlish greetings among Nell and two rather pretty girls about her age, watched Mrs. Travers introduce herself to two women and two well dressed businessmen.

They went off up the street to the hotel on the corner to allow the visitors a chance to clean up and eat breakfast. Jude had an idea that after they arrived back at the ranch the Stantons and Bordens would sleep most of the day until the evening festivities began. Bag after bag and trunk after trunk was unlashed and tossed down to be stacked on the porch. Joe was up on the north boundary with bedroll wagon, stacking summer supplies in the line camps and leaving some orders from Nute Shelby with the Hensen foreman about the spring roundup, which would be held separate from the T4. They were going to slash brand everything and restamp with the T4.

So presently Bronson's stablehand, a youth named Toby, rattled up in a light livery rig. Jude helped him load all the baggage and watched him set off with it for the ranch. He debated a morning drink, changed his mind, and went up to kill time with Edwina in her shop until the others were ready to go. She drew him like a magnet. Blackie strolled by before Jude reached the shop and exchanged greetings.

"Going up to see Edwina?" He grinned.

"Thought I might," Jude said carelessly. "Nothing else to do."

"Except see Edwina. You like her pretty well, don't you, Jude? Yeah," his tone a little edged, "and she likes you too. You wouldn't have any ideas about moving in on that range, would you, Jude?"

"If I get any, I'll try to move in, Blackie," was the quiet reply.

"Don't," the sheriff said coldly. "Don't ever make that foolish mistake, Jude. Edwina's still my woman and no man is going to cut in ahead of me. You or anybody else. You know," he went on in a milder tone, "it sorta looked like our trails have parted. There was a time when I figured that you and me were to become pardners. But it seems at every turn of the road, Jude, I find you there either blocking it or complicating things for me. We're not the same kind of pardners we used to be. You were a green nester kid and I was a cow puncher who got you started. Now you're a death dealing gun fighter with six notches filed—"

"Not notches, Blackie."

"—and I'm the lawman who's liable to either have to hang you or outlaw you. Looks like our trails not only have parted. They've swung around until they're meeting head on. I hope I don't ever have to go after you, Jude."

"So do I."

"Well, I'll be moseying. And remember what I said: from now on you keep away from Edwina. She's my woman and I'll kill any man who tries to take her away from me."

So it was out in the open at last. Jude had known it was coming, felt the rising tide, the wide gulf that now separated them. They no longer were merely drifting on different trails.

They were enemies.

"Remember," Blackie warned, "Don't go in that shop."

HE moved off down the boardwalk toward Sol's store, the worn butts of the two heavy pistols bobbing to and fro with each step. Jude leaned there against the wall for a few moments. Then he too moved along the boardwalk. He went in and took off his hat.

"Hello, Jude!" Edwina exclaimed. "I saw you come in. I was hoping you'd drop by."

CHAPTER XXXII

PRESENTLY the party came into the hotel lobby, looking much refreshed. Stanton was tall and distinguished looking with grey hair and a close clipped mustache. Borden, his partner in various business and financial enterprises, was much shorter and bald.

The eight of them stepped out onto the porch and the men began looking the town over.

"We're growing up pretty fast," Mrs. Travers explained. "Nesters everywhere and more coming in. But it's still a pretty wild place at times."

"So I heard," smiled Stanton. "Stage driver spoke of a terrible gun fight here just day before yesterday afternoon; three men killed, another shot."

"It was two of our boys," Mrs. Travers replied. "I hate the shooting affairs of these wild cowboys, but we're having a little trouble with the nesters. It'll blow over in time."

"Who did it?"

"That boy coming from the livery in that surrey."

Mrs. Borden, a motherly looking woman of about forty, stared. The two eastern girls' eyes had widened.

"Why," Mrs. Borden gasped out. "He's no more than a boy! He doesn't look dangerous."

"Neither," Nell cut in, "does a rattlesnake until it coils to strike. That 'boy' there has killed six men in gun fights, Mrs. Borden."

Julie Stanton, a pretty girl with dark eyes and hair, shuddered. "Is he going to drive us? I'm afraid of him."

Nell laughed. "Yes, and he'll be a lot more scared of you, dear. He's been on the ranch for months and he still calls me 'Miss Travers.' And I warn the both of you—don't try taking him away from me. He's mine. That is," she added laughingly, "if he'll ever stop calling me by my last name and try to make love to me."

"Nell!" gasped out her mother in horror. She turned to the two other women. "You'll just have to excuse her. She was pretty much of a lady when she arrived home from school—in fact, her Pa thinks almost too much. But it's all wore off now. She rides all over the range, shoots jackrabbits with a light rifle, eats with the hands in the dugout, and hangs around the corrals. I wouldn't be surprised if she doesn't try her hand at topping a bronk one of these days. And now talking like that!"

"Well, it's true," her daughter answered defiantly. "I do everything I can to make Jude make love to me—"

It ended in another horrified gasp from her mother.

Jude had swung the rented surrey in alongside the one the three of them had driven from the ranch. He sat there with the reins in hand, feeling a little embarrassed under the curious gaze of six easterners. He supposed it was because he was about the first cow puncher that any of them had seen up close.

"You girls get in with Jude," Mrs. Travers said. "I'll drive the rest of you folks out in our rig."

"Julie, you get up front with Jude," Nell directed. "Helen and I will ride in the back. Girls, this is Jude Gordon. Jude, Julie and Helen."

Jude touched his hatbrim and nodded and then slid over to the left side of the seat. He twisted the heavy six shooter sheathed at his right thigh around to make room for the girl. She was looking at it with a kind of delicious fascination.

"All set?" he asked.

"Turn 'em loose," Nell replied gaily. "And don't worry, girls, if they shy at a coyote or a rattlesnake and break to run, Jude can hold them down."

They jogged out of town at a trot, the girls talking and chattering. Jude kept his face to the front and devoted his attention to driving. After a few miles Julie Stanton lost her fear of him and began to talk. He answered with "Yes, ma'm," and "No, ma'm," and kept on driving.

Presently he became aware that Nell, with two companions to embolden her, was bedevilling him.

"We're going to have a wonderful time tonight. We've got all the furniture in the two big rooms pushed back against the walls and the carpets carried out. That floor is as smooth as glass, and Pa's hired two fiddlers, two guitars, a mandolin, and a woman from town to play the big new piano. You're going to dance with Julie and Helen several times, aren't you, Jude."

"All right," he said shortly.

"He's so talkative," commented Nell, her eyes dancing. "He'll talk for hours like that. You see he's been up in a line camp all winter—" she had to stop and answer questions as to what a line camp was—"he's been there all winter with nesters shooting at him, and catching rustlers—he brought one in Thursday who had killed a ranger—that's what brought on the gun fight when a nester shot Cic and Jude killed the three of them—and now he likes to talk. He'll talk you to death, and he'll be making eyes at you and trying to get you off around the corner of the house tonight and hug you in the dark—"

Jude turned in the seat, his face a flaming crimson. "I wish you'd shut up," he said bluntly.

Surprise widened her eyes. Then she went off into peals of delighted laughter and the other two took it up. The three of them shrieked, and Jude, his face redder than ever, breathed a sigh of relief when they reached the ranch. He watched them get down and then drove on down to unharness.

THE festivities started just at sundown. All through the late afternoon rigs and riders on horseback had been arriving. The cut up parts of the butchered steer were still turning on the spits under Pokey and Ike's critical eyes. Admiral Big Bottom—still referred to as a "he" despite the disgrace he'd brought upon both Ike and himself by laying a sterile egg — perched on the side of a big goods box and squawked, "Bilge water!" at everybody who passed by and eyed them with his evil, beady eyes. A big keg of whiskey had been set up not far from the veranda, with scores of tin cups on a table, and men and women were strolling over the grass, talking and laughing. And right beside the whiskey was a big box over which Nute Shelby kept a critical eye. It was filled with gunbelts and pistols. There was going to be no whiskey gun fight to mar the housewarming.

Long tables had been set up and on these Ike and Pokey laid cut up chunks of meat. It was warm and juicy, and there were pickles and heaping piles of biscuits and sweet bread to go with it.

Jude came up from the bunkhouse with his boots newly shined and his thick shock of finely spun hair slicked down. He saw Nell and the two other girls in a group of women and promptly went over the other way, to where Cic sat propped up on his tarp near the whiskey keg. Everywhere was laughter and good natured banter. Blackie was in the midst of it, laughing and talking with everyone, and rebutting jeers from his former bunkhouse mates about his soft job. Jude saw Edwina, lovely in a long flowing dress, pinched in at the waist, the lights from the open windows and doors reflecting from her golden hair. Jude had never believed a woman could be so beautiful and desirable. She had the gracious manners of a woman of the world. She was laughing and talking with Sol and his wife, Sol unbending long enough to have a couple of drinks from the keg.

Travers stood on the porch, host to the two men from the east. He was pointing out to the financiers the sweep of his southern range, now being closed in under a blanket of darkness.

"But the trouble is," he said, "that these nesters are buying out from under me. I've fought the idea of paying money for land but it looks like I'm licked."

"Why? It'll be worth money in years to come. A few cents an acre, and the way this country is growing?" asked Stanton.

"I know. I've finally come to realize it. But I've just bought another outfit that's took all my ready cash — that and this house. Gentlemen, I'm flat broke until I put my next herd up the trail to Abilene this summer. That's stating it blunt. What I'm worried about is that before I can come back with more cash and get legal title to my range, the nesters will have closed in on me. I can't buck them in a bunch. So I'm going to say it flatly: if you two men would like to invest—including the profits of the herd going up this summer—I'll see that you get interest on your money. Think it over for a few days and let me know. Well, let's forget business and get those fiddlers going. We're going to dance through until daylight."

He stuck his head through a window and called to one of the fiddlers, who was tuning up. The man nodded, put down the instrument, and went on a hunt for the others. Presently the first strains of a waltz floated out of the huge house with its wide open double doors, and the celebration was on.

Stanton and Borden stood talking. "Well, what do you think, Jim?" the shorter man asked.

"I'd say loan, not invest. Take a first mortgage. I checked up a bit before we came out. The east is going to be saturated with beef in a few more years and prices might drop. Then there's droughts, floods, disease, not to speak of these fellows they call rustlers. We'll talk it over later."

The two rangers had put in appearance, taking off their gun belts. They leaned a pair of repeating rifles against the box. One of them carried a large roll of paper beneath his arm.

Doctor Vogel got himself a drink from the keg. He turned as Cic's voice called. "Hey, Doc, bring me one, will you?"

"You see?" Vogel snarled at Jude. "It's just like I told you. It's not enough that I have to patch them up, I've got to play servant too." He poured from the spigot into another tin cup and carried it over.

"Ah, that's fine, Doc," Cic said. "You kin take back this empty and fill it fer me later."

"Hell I will!" snapped the physician; and added gruffly: How do you feel? That wound open up on the ride back in the wagon? I told that fool cow puncher to drive carefully."

"Nope," replied the cheerful Cic.

"Probably cauterized," was the snapped reply. "With my whiskey. From the inside."

THE early evening was marred by but one minor incident. Right in the middle of a double square dance Admiral Big Bottom, loaded to the ears with whiskey, plopped his green bundle of feathers squarely through the double doors. He skidded for about fifteen feet on his tail feathers, horny feet thrust out in front of him in a frantic effort to put on the brakes. Then he got up in the middle of the dance floor as the music stopped with a crash and laughter rang out. The Admiral surveyed them all with a baleful stare and then started across the polished floor toward where Mrs. Borden sat in a chair along the wall, chatting with Mrs. Travers. The Admiral stopped directly before her crossed feet and eyed her with drunken gravity.

"Why, how cute!" the good lady exclaimed in delight. "A parrot."

"Bilge water!" retorted the Admiral.

Ike came flying in through the doorway, his white apron in contrast to his boots. He hurried across the floor in the face of more laughter. The dancers stood poised on the floor, arms around their pardners.

"Ahoy, you blasted swab!" Ike roared at the bird. "Get back to the galley where you belong."

"Go to hell!" screeched Admiral Big Bottom.

Ike's face changed color as he looked at Mrs. Borden.

"You'll have to excuse the swab, lady," he said. "He was a perfect gentleman when I brought 'im here, but he's been around these blasted steer punchers so long he's picked up a bit o' rough langwige. But he don't usually cuss like that in front of ladies. Come here, you g— you swab."

"An' we threw the rotten bos'n in the ocean," came the croaking reply, and he gave Mrs. Borden what was almost a beady-eyed, evil leer.

Ike, his face red, hurriedly scooped him up and almost fled out the front door.

"Parrot puncher, parrot puncher!" jeered Mike Kessler, standing beside Stanton and Borden, at the scuttling cook's retreating back.

The flustered cook threw an oath over his shoulder and the man who had tended the branding fire the day Mike got tangled up with the yearling gave off with a derisive snicker. He had been regaling the two men with an account of the incident.

"So there they lay on the ground, Mike an' this yearlin'," he continued in the face of Mike's glares. "This yearlin' would slobber in Mike's face an' then Mike would slobber in the yearlin's face. Purty soon Mike says, 'How's Paw and Maw gittin' along?' An' the yearlin' he says, 'Purty good except that Maw is powerful sad these days. Paw, the old fool, quit her an' run away with a young red heifer. An' she wants to know when you're comin' home. So thet only leaves the three of us in the fambly now—you, me an' maw.' So Mike says, 'Thet's too bad. I'll hev to go and see the old she-devil one of these years.' So the yearlin' he asts Mike, 'What brand you wearin'?' An' Mike says, T4 with a V-gotch under my right ear. They got me in the roundup last year because I'm a year older'n you . . .' "

Stanton collapsed. He sat down in a porch chair, leaned back and roared. Borden shook so hard he spilled part of his coffee, watching the hasty retreat Mike was beating for the supper table.

"Just you wait," Mike was muttering under his breath. "You won't think it's so funny the night you comes home from town and finds a six foot bullsnake in your bunk, Mister Floyd."

CHAPTER XXXIII

JUDE had claimed Edwina for his first dance, floating across the smooth floor with her in a waltz. She danced as smoothly as a feather, and beneath the silk handkerchief he held at the back of her waist to keep the sweat from soiling her dress he felt the smooth play of her body.

She pushed back far enough to look at him. "Jude I never dreamed you were such a smooth dancer. Where did you learn?"

"Up home among the nesters," he answered and they both laughed.

He was unaware that over across the room Nell's eyes were expressing indignation. As the owner's daughter, she felt that he should have waited for her to have one free and then claim her. But the ranch punchers, putting down their first flush of bashfulness, had finally got started and were giving the three girls a busy time of it. Blackie was claiming dance after dance with Nell, whispering softly in her ear.

Edwina closed against Jude again. "Be careful, Jude," she whispered. "Blackie came into my room last night and warned me to keep away from you. He says that I'm still his woman and that I like—that I'll be no other man's as long as he wants it that way. Jude, I'm getting a little afraid of him. He could be dangerous, now that he's got the law on his shoulders."

"I wouldn't let it worry you."

"I'm not worried about myself. He'll kill you."

"He might give it a try. I'll worry about that when the time comes."

He finally claimed Nell, who was properly indignant. They were quarrelling by the time the dance ended. They had a few more square dances and then the musicians put down their instruments and went out to refresh themselves at the barrel and to eat. It was along toward midnight. The two rangers had taken no part in the festivities except to have a couple of small drinks and chat amiably with the hands standing around on the porch and watching through the doors and windows.

Then, as intermission set in, they went inside, looking out of place on the now deserted floor.

"Mr. Travers?" his wife said, in answer to a question by one of them. "Why, yes, Pa's in there in that other room. Right through that door there." She pointed.

"Thank you, ma'm," replied the younger.

They moved toward the door, the older man with the hard face trailing. They knocked and Travers' voice called, "Come in."

"Sorry to intrude, Mr. Travers," the younger man said. "We didn't know you had company."

"It's all right, boys. Mr. Stanton and Borden are talking over some business with me. These men are Hardin and Rennel, Texas Rangers working in here to help stop this rustling."

Hardin, the younger, shook hands and so did Rennel. Hardin took the big roll of paper from beneath his arm.

"We could come back later," he suggested.

"Not at all. I presume it concerns the ranch and these other men have a right to sit in and listen. They might invest out here and might as well start learning now. What is it, boys?"

Hardin unrolled the paper and spread it out on the table. It was criss-crossed with various lines that showed rivers and mountains and newly surveyed boundaries.

"Here's the set up, Mr. Travers. Last year the Eight Cross outfit bought title to a big strip of land covering several miles long and three or four wide. That land goes over onto your boundary, or what you've always considered your boundary. It's legally owned by that ranch. We talked to Owsley, the foreman, up on the Cap Rock the other day and he says he's about to start six hundred head grazing on that range. He also says you've got men up there with guns to stop him when he comes over."

"I have," Travers said harshly.

Hardin shook his head. "That's just the trouble. It's why we're here. The Texas Rangers are backing them up because they're in the right. They have title to that land, which will make you a trespasser. If you follow through what you say you aim to, we'll have to come after you with a warrant. If any Eight Cross man is killed, whichever one of your men who does the shooting will hang or go to prison. We're down here to tell you to back up to the new boundary made by the surveyors."

IT WAS a hard blow. It almost staggered Travers. He looked at the two silent easterners and something like a sigh went out of him. "You see what I was saying, men. I helped clear this country of the Comanches. My mother had her head split open by one of the red devils. I came back from the war, got my outfit together, and took over what I thought I was entitled to. Now they're buying land on my range, trimming me from all sides. They're using money from the sale of my own rustled cattle to whittle me down. A two gunman named Red Tolliver, over to the south, slipped in and cut off two miles of my boundary along the river just the other day. And do you know what the cattle rustling dog did? He registered a T iron with a mark that can be run over my 4 and make a perfect brand blotting job—a kind of arrowhead. That's what he calls it. The TA. Gentlemen, I want to borrow enough money to buy up every foot of my present range. I want the deal swung as quickly as possible before they cut me down still more. Name your own terms and rate of interest, but get me that money!"

He turned to the two waiting rangers. "All right, boys. I'll call off my men. That thieving outfit, burning my H Bar brand into an Eight Cross, is cleaning me. I know when I'm licked. I'm bull headed in a lot of ways but I know when I'm bucking a stacked deck."

The rangers thanked him and went out. There was silence in the room for a moment. The two easterners exchanged glances. Finally Stanton spoke.

"All right, Travers. Get your surveyors to work at once and then let us know how much you need. You'll get it. A first mortgage on the ranch buildings and land and cattle, plus all equipment. I think you can come out all right."

Stanton was still chuckling inwardly over the branding fire incident; and neither the punchers or Travers would ever know that that story was the means of such a quick decision. The financier figured that if these western men from the plains of Texas possessed such a lusty sense of humor, then they would be a good financial gamble.

The house-warming celebration broke up at daylight. Everybody was danced out, tired, happy. The punchers went toward the bunkhouse to roll in and sleep most of the day through. The guests from the east repaired to their rooms. Saddled horses and rigs came alive, Travers and his wife seeing the last of them depart. It was something none of them would forget for a long time. Pokey and Ike snored in their bunks, dead drunk, and the sleepy Admiral on his perch occasionally opened a beady eye and muttered croaking sounds before closing it again.

They cleaned up the remnants of the celebration and life flowed back into regular channels. The spring, or calf, roundup got under way and was soon over, Shelby and Travers aghast at the losses. The rustlers were taking them from all sides. Travers pared his herds down to the bone, picking out not only old cows but stuff he needed for stockers. And still the best he could do was twenty-five hundred head.

The outfit got ready for the drive to Abilene. Those who had gone up the year before would remain behind and give the rest of the hands a chance. Ike rolled out in the chuckwagon, the protesting Admiral in an improvised cage.

The herd was on its way.

It was the summer of 1870. Abilene had had four years as a rip-roaring trail town. It had one more to go before, in 1871, new names would begin to spring up. Hays. Ellsworth. And the famed Dodge City, as the railroad pushed on further west and swung south, making for a shorter drive.

Jude worked the summer through on the ranch, riding from dawn until dark. He seldom went to town anymore.Twice men fired at him from long range and he sold the .44-40 repeater and bought himself a .52 caliber single shot Sharps. It was heavy for a saddle gun, but it would throw a 550-grain slug of lead a lot further than the powder charge back of the repeater's slugs. He grew shaggy-haired and more silent, withdrawing more from bunkhouse life. There had been an election that summer and Blackie, with no opponent, was now duly elected sheriff. Nobody else wanted the job in the face of what still could become a cattle war. Hardin and Renner had disappeared. Gone like shadows. Travers owned his land now, barring the first mortgage held by the departed easterners.

The outfit rolled in from Kansas again with only two punchers missing. One had quit. The other had been killed in a gun fight. Admiral Big Bottom had sunk his beak into the nose of an over friendly barkeep and ended up in jail with Ike, croaking "Bilge water!" and cursing the jailers with salty oaths.

It had been a dry summer, the grass burned to a crisp. Nute Shelby hadn't gone up this year, sending another man as trail boss, a man who had been up twice before. Shelby rode all the hours of daylight, studying the lean cattle and looking at waterholes. He bought scrapers and put men to work down in the bottoms of the gullies and arroyos, peeling away at the red earth and using the dirt to make small dams.

THE herd had brought a good price but not as much as the year before. Cattle by the tens of thousands were pouring up the trail, their owners eager to harvest the golden bonanza. Travers paid the slightly exorbitant rates on the mortgage, rode with Shelby, and shook his head. He was being rustled dry, some of his older stuff wouldn't come through the winter, and with so many of his stockers now already in the slaughter houses his herds had fallen off alarmingly.

On the contrary, the Nester Pool had jumped to twenty-five hundred head. The Eight Cross was expanding. Red Tolliver swaggered about town, prosperous and contented. His TA iron was going on T4 cows and calves alike.

It had been a hard year and none of them realized it more than Jude. He had become an automaton. His hair was down over his ears, long and shaggy, his equipment worn. But he had never lost faith. This was a bad year. Any outfit had to expect such things. He was now twenty years old, Nell eighteen. He saw her at intervals, usually down by the corrals or out on the range. He had not been in the big house since the night of the celebration.

They made the fall roundup; and when

it was over the results were appalling. Travers would be lucky if he could put fifteen hundred head up the trail the next year.

Blackie and his two deputies had made some show of going after the rustlers. They had arrested four different men and presented what appeared to be solid evidence, but the jury was packed with nester men who just as promptly freed them. But the pool was breaking up now. It had become so prosperous that many of the men were now running small spreads of their own. They were living off the increases of the stock, buying more and rustling others. Their spreads were growing, a dozen new brands cropping up here and there.

It was the beginning of the heydey of the small cowman. The disintegration of the early barons who controlled as many as ten counties.

On a night that fall, when the weather began to turn a bit cold, the sheriff sat in the Eight Cross ranch house up on the Cap Rock. There were about thirty men present. These represented the north side of the pool. There was the wisp of smoke from cigars, plenty of whiskey, and an air of well being. They had just finished dividing up the profits of the big drive to Abilene, most of it rustled from the T4 and quite a lot more from a couple of big spreads sixty miles north. The money had been counted out and put away when Blackie finally leaned back in his chair. He rose and flicked the ashes off a fifty cent cigar. The buzz of voices gradually died down.

"Well, boys, it's been a good year and they'll get better. Now . . . shall I make a long speech or a short one?" he grinned.

Coarse laughter followed this. "Hell, we got plenty of time, sheriff. Tawk till yu git outa breath."

"That means more or less to make it short. So I won't be too long. I called you up here for a little more than just to divide up the money each of you had coming according to the number of head he contributed to the Pool's trail herd this year. I have, of course, already met with the boys down south and gave them their share. I told them the same thing that I'm going to tell you. We're growing, but at the same time we've got to change our methods to meet changing conditions. The country's settling up that fast. In the beginning Travers and these other big owners far up north had up to forty or fifty square miles of range and sometimes more. They had cattle by the thousands and not too many men to handle them. It was a rustler's paradise—and, I might add, we made the most of it during the past couple of years."

This one filled the room with a burst of course laughter.

"You came here, most of you," the sheriff went on, "with a pair of oxen or maybe a broken down team with big patches on the seat of your britches, your wife with one dirty dress, and your kids half naked. Now some of you are freighting in building supplies and putting up pretty comfortable places. Your kids are growing up. There's been four country schools started up this way alone during the past year with paid teachers. Two or three years ago when you went into a store—that is, any except Sol's in Alden—you were a dirty, stinking, starving nester and where was your money before they brought out the goods? Today the story is quite a bit different. You're small cowmen now. It means you're on your way up and the pioneer cattlemen like Harry Travers is on his way out. You've got money and you're expanding. You're prosperous. Some of you will end up as big time cowmen because you swung a long loop to get your start, depending upon your business ability. Others among you will wind up broke and working for wages because you didn't have the business ability.

"The point that I'm stressing is that times have changed and we've got to change with them. The rustling bonanza of two years ago is over. The law is tightening up. I put four of you back of bars these past months because you lost your heads and got too greedy and too careless. I had to do it for the protection of the others. And I packed the jury with nesters who just as quickly turned you loose. Not a verdict took over fifteen minutes."

A BIG man with hulking shoulders and a black beard came to his feet, scowling and waving a bottle of whiskey. "Thet's a goddam lie," he shouted. "It was eighteen minutes before they turned *me* loose."

Loud *haw-haws* filled the room and a

man grabbed him by the shoulder and pushed him down into his chair. "Sit down, Sid. You wuz caught plumb red handed with two rustled cows an' calves an' eighteen minutes ain't much time to spend to make a try fer four critters."

Sid sat down. "Eighteen minutes hell!" he snorted. "What about them two days I laid in jail before the Pool bailed me out. An' I didn't get the cows an' calves after all," he complained.

Jed Owsley, foreman for Blackie and a big shouldered man not unlike Nute Shelby in manners, quieted them down. He was in with the Pool, working on a percentage basis with Blackie.

"Have yore fun, boys, but let Blackie finish," he told them.

"As I was saying, things are changing," Blackie went on in his smooth voice, "Your kids are growing up and going to their own schools and wearing decent clothes. They're eating something besides corn pone and molasses now. And it's up to you men to see to it that they grow up respectable. The kind of crude rustling that Grady got caught at is out. I want that clearly understood. Just about everyone of you now has enough cows to live off the increase and buy more with your profits. I want every man here to register his brand. Of course, if you get a chance to pick up a few calves here and there without risk you can do it. If you can slip out in a bad rainstorm while the creek is flooded, it'll be all right to drive a few head down and shoot the cows and let them float downstream and take the calves. But any good thing has to come to an end and the bonanza is over. The rustling we do from now on is going to be done by younger men picked for their jobs. Instead of stampeding a herd and running off two hundred head like we did that night up on Gamma Creek in Kansas we'll have forty or fifty younger men of the Pool pick out their calves, scout the lay of the land for days to check on the line riders, and play it safe.

"I can tell you now that Travers is hard hit. He bought his range all right, but he bought it with borrowed money from two eastern financiers who're sinking their claws in for the interest on the loan. His T4 ranch is mortgaged to the hilt. I've been in touch with these two men—their names are Borden and Stanton—and I've painted a pretty black picture of Travers' position. I've got them worried. They're beginning to think they've made a bad investment. I told them that there was scab among Travers' cattle."

"But there ain't," a man's voice spoke up.

Blackie grinned at the speaker. "There will be," he said softly. "Red Tolliver has two hundred head of critters so covered with scab that they hardly have any hair left. I've never seen such mangy critters in all my life. As soon as the T4 brands that Red and some of the boys put on them heal a bit more they're going to be shoved over onto the T4 range and scattered among Travers' prime beef. We're going to put him out of business. And at the right moment, when Borden and Stanton, these two eastern men, get bluffed enough to foreclose, I'm going to sell the T4 ranch at public auction on the courthouse steps in Alden, and that mortgage is going to be bought up by money from the Nester Pool!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

THAT one brought on a demonstration of sheer exuberance, partly whiskey and cigar inspired. They slapped each other on the back, whooped and yelled. Only one man of them all beside Blackie stood silent: Jed Owsley. The cold faced foreman of the Eight Cross stood with his hard back against the wall and said nothing. He looked and Blackie, tolerance in it, and Blackie returned the look. The noise finally quieted down. The men of the northern section of the Pool resumed their seats. The cigar smoke roiled higher, grew thicker, and somebody finally opened a door.

Blackie looked them over. "Have I made everything clear?" he asked.

"Clear as we want it," a man's voice answered.

"All right. Then we're breaking up the Nester Pool as of tonight."

It got quiet in the room. They dropped their cigars low between fingers and stared at him. This they didn't understand.

"But you just said—" a man began.

"I said we'd buy up Travers' mortgage, bid in at public auction when the time comes, with Pool money. But each man will get range according to how much he contributes." Blackie's voice was sharp. "From now on it's up to each one of you individually. We'll go on rustling along the lines I just laid out. We've got to break Travers' back. From now on each of you who rustle a cow will do so at the risk of his own neck. The rangers have drifted but the law still has to be upheld. I'll arrest any man of you caught in the actual act of running off Travers' cattle. I want that clearly understood. Of course," he added with his good natured smile, "I'll try to pack the jury and see that you get off."

This one brought loud guffaws. Men looked at each other and grinned. Jed Owsley still stood with his back to the wall, something that was almost a frown on his poker face. The smoke roiled, drifted out the open door.

"We'll work slow and carefully from now on," the sheriff continued. "We'll scab Travers' herd until they'll spend most of their time scratching instead of grazing. And one word of warning," he added sharply. "If you see a scabbed cow or calf up this way in the coming months, don't rustle it. Make damned sure of that. When I sell Travers out at auction, and we buy up, we'll go out and clean the range, shooting and burning every carcass. Scab's a damned bad thing. All it takes is for a scabby cow to brush a mesquite limb and then another cow, coming along the trail, to brush the same limb. Next thing you know she's got it too. But we don't want to kill the goose that laid the golden egg. So watch your step, boys. That's about all I've got to say. Jed Owsley here is going to pick the younger men to do these special rustling jobs. The rest of you are going to rustle at your own risks. Any more questions?"

A man rose. He tossed the remains of his cigar to the floor. It emitted sparks and then slowly died in ashes.

"Yes, sheriff. You said we wuz to register all our brands. You own the Cross Eight. You goin' to register it? Any Ranger or anybody else could find out who owns it thet way. It mightn't look so good for yu if people found out the Eight Cross is yore property."

"The ranch will ge registered in Jed Owsley's name, as owner. We'll fix it up next week. Any more before I head back to Alden tonight?"

Owsley's shoulders moved away from the wall. He was as tall as Nute Shelby, nearly as blonde.

"I've got one, Blackie. This side winder kid called Jude. First, you were going to bring him in the Pool. Then you were going to take care of him so's he wouldn't cause us anymore trouble. I hear he's still down on the T4."

"That's a fair question, Jed, and I'll answer it. I picked that kid up in Kansas because I figured he'd be a good man for us. He proved it in Abilene when he killed Harrison, who was throwing a shot at my back. You all know—or don't you?—that I was supposed to kill Harrison. He had organized the Pool. He was head of it. But he was so greedy that he was making each of you pay him a percentage of your cows on that fifteen hundred head the nesters sent north the first year. It was agreed that I was to take over in his boots, and he must have got wind of it somehow. I made two plays at him and he backed down before he finally tried to put one into me from behind while I was playing the roulette wheel. It was that nester kid Jude who grabbed one of my guns and did the job for me. He killed Harrison. I tried to swing him my way with a deputy's badge but it didn't seem to work. Before I hardly could turn around he'd got Tabor, Jergens, Porter, and those other two. But I warned him about several things, and you notice he's been pretty quiet these past months."

"Fair enough, Blackie," Owsley replied. "But he broke loose twice since he came back. Five men from the Pool. When's he going to do it again?"

"He won't, Jed. If he does I'll arrest him on sight and then bring in his body after he tried to 'escape.' Fair enough?"

The foreman grunted. "Fair enough, I reckon."

The meeting broke up and the sheriff started the long night ride back to Alden, feeling better than he had ever felt in his life. Things were shaping up just right. He seemed to be making progress with Nell, after long months of talking to her every time she came to town; she was young and impressionable enough to come to him once he had command and possession of the big white house where she now lived; and from it, with her as mistress, he could direct operations and control politics. The thought was a pleasant one.

Blackie rode on through the night, pleased with the world and himself.

At the same moment Jude was in his bunk at the T4, wide awake and staring into the darkness while the others of the outfit snored soundly. He knew that conditions on the T4 were bad—far worse than Travers was admitting. He could see it in the drawn lines of Nute Shelby's face. But a puncher must be loyal to his outfit, and thus Jude had kept putting down the thoughts of saddling up one day and drifting.

THE restlessness was upon him again. He wasn't sure whether it was because he felt he had learned about all there was to know from work on the T4; it might have been the subconscious thought that the nesters had the upper hand and that a man must go far to greener fields if he wanted to get started on his own. It might have been the prescence of Nell, growing more beautiful every day—the occasional meetings with Edwina when he was in town, and those emotions she roused in him. He didn't know. He wondered if he would ever know.

He got up and went back to work the next day, and on a morning two weeks later he rode the south range. The line now had been pulled back more than three miles. Red Tolliver's cattle with that suspicious T brand followed by a crude arrowhead were on the old range further south, along the river bluffs. Jude dropped down a gully, worked his horse up the opposite side, and then stopped to stare.

Then action followed look. He bent in the saddle, jerked the heavy Sharps free of its scabbard, straightened. It went up to his shoulder and roared and the cow a hundred yards distance went down under the shocking impact of the 550 grain slug of lead. Jude levered out the smoking shell, inserted another, and rode over. He pulled up and looked down.

It didn't have much hair. Where the hair had been was mostly a mass of scabs. It was the mangiest critter he had ever seen, and he knew that wherever it had brushed a mesquite or cedar limb along the trails it was leaving a trail of infection. He cut a wide circle and began looking for more. Within an hour he had shot four more. He went spurring down a gully after a fifth and the report of the rifle from two hundred yards away caused him to swerve sharply into the brush. He saw a faint cloud of smoke up on the ridge and heard the drumming of Hoofs.

Jude slapped the steel to his bronk and went hard after the would be dry gulcher. He drove his mount mercilessly up in a scrambling climb to the top of a ridge and saw the rider. He was spurring madly away, toward the sanctuary of a gully.

Jude hit the ground as his horse slid to its haunches. He dropped to a knee, took careful aim with the .52 caliber single shot, and another cloud of grey smoke wisped up with the heavy report. The distant horse did a running somersault, throwing its rider overhead, and Jude went forward at a run on foot, reloading. He came up to the top of where a woodrat's nest made a mound around the bole of a mesquite tree and saw his man. The other was down back of his dead horse, rifle up, peering.

Jude levelled the Sharps and aimed for the top side of the horse. He doubted that the slugs would pierce the carcass. He fired again and heard a startled yell, then broke down the side of the gully for a hundred yard sprint in his high heeled boots. When he came up again the man was still there. Slowly Jude lifted his hat, dangling it on a stick. A spurt of dust leaped up beneath it and he let the headgear drop out of sight. The downed rider came up, rifle ready, cautious. Jude rose too, rifle cocked at his shoulder.

"Throw up your hands!" he yelled.

A rifle came up instead and Jude felt the heavy kick of the single shot against his own shoulder. He dropped flat, reloaded from the belt around his waist that was now half .44's and half .52's for the rifle, and then raised once more. He got up and went forward, the gun half way to his shoulder.

The rustler was down, his gun off to one side. Jude came closer to the horribly coughing man, substituting his six shooter for the Sharps.

"How many of those scabs did you run over on our line?" he demanded.

"Go to . . . hell," coughed out Red Tolliver.

"Anybody with you?"

"Go . . . to hell."

"Who stampeded that herd up on Gramma Creek that night and shot Tolson?

Who killed Jim Underhill? Who's the real head of this Nester Pool?"

"Blackie . . . all of 'em Blackie," Tolliver gasped out, some kind of a terrible grin contorting his mouth and the lashless lids opened real wide. Then they closed with the chubby, red haired hands lying alongside the butts of the now two harmless pistols. It might have been sub-conscious, that last statement. Red might not have known what he was saying. But he had said it.

And now Red Tolliver was dead.

CHAPTER XXXV

THREE riders spurred into sight a short distance away, drumming hard, smashing down through the mesquites. They were bent over low in saddles.

"Don't shoot, Jude!" Mike Kessler yelled, straightening. "It's me—Mike!"

The two men with him were new men, line camp riders along the now whittled down south boundary. Jude lowered the Sharps and stood as they pounded up. They reined in hard, the barrels of their horses heaving.

"Holy cow!" Mike yelled again, swinging down. "Red Tolliver! You hurt, Jude?"

"No," Jude said. "I'm all right."

He said it in an absent kind of way, his thoughts off afar. Seven men now. Seven notches that had never been filed on his gun. And he knew this was the end. The end for him as far as the T4 was concerned. It was the end of many things in many ways. Harry Travers, for instance. Harry Travers might be able to pull through and he might not. He might be able to hold his range and still be the biggest cowman among them all. But the term "settler" and "nester" were going out of date. Out of them and their rustling was coming a new brand of small Texas cowman who, in the years to come, would own big spreads. They would look back in the years, as respected members of the country, and remember with grins, silent perhaps, how they had swung a long loop to get started. Their sons riding fine horses, their daughters going to college.

These nesters . . . who were fighting and rustling Harry Travers' giant T4 range.

And Jude realized then that he had made a bad mistake. He had come in when the range already was taken; where a man had to be either a cow hand or a rustler. Men like Travers already had gotten in on the ground floor. He'd played his part in loyalty to his boss, killing when he didn't want to kill. Fighting the wind and hail and sleet and rain and snow to insure that the T4 and the girl and wife and father in it remained in the big house.

But he was a cog in a wheel; he was nothing more. There was Nell's beautiful face, she who seemed to grow more lovely each day; she who quarrelled and fought with him at every opportunity. And there was Edwina too, the ex-dancehall singer who aroused such fire in him.

But it was the end, that Jude knew. The end of an era, a time of life, a period in which he had done his best to play his part. And now the thing was done. Harry Travers had given his best in a fight for survival, and was still fighting. So had Jude. But he remembered Blackie and the fact that the sheriff had warned him. This one—this seventh man down in death beneath his guns—would not be passed off

"What's the matter with you, Jude?" Mike demanded. "You got a funny look on your face. Oh, I know. I guess I don't blame you. What happened?"

Jude told them everything; what had happened; what Red had gasped out, perhaps unintentionally, as he lay dying; the setup over which Blackie was overlord.

The two line riders sat their horses in silence, listening. The ever present buzzards sailed in the sky. A breeze whispered through the mesquites; and off in the distance a cow bellowed, the bawl of her calf coming in answer.

"So that's how it is?" Mike gasped out, something that was almost disbelief on his face. "He hung Grady to shut his mouth, eh?"

"That's right."

"And all the time I thought he used his belt on himself. What are you going to do now?"

"Going in to the ranch and make a full report to Nute and Travers. I'm going to tell them everything. So I'm burning the breeze. You boys spread out and hunt every scab you can find. That brand on the cow I shot was healed but not enough. They were driven over. You boys scour this country and shoot every scab you see. If you don't this whole south range will be infected in a few months. You'll have to dip every head wearing a T4 brand. Hit out!"

He was unaware that he was giving orders and that they were obeying. Jude went back to where his horse stood with reins trailing and caught it. He swung up and made the seven miles back to the ranch in good time.

He went directly to the horse corral and unsaddled. He saw no movement of life around the ranch. A rooster crowed in the chicken pens. A milk pen calf bawled. Smoke wisped up lazily from the dugout dining room. The late morning sun shone down, no breeze in the air.

The cream colored sorrel was in the corral, fresh and rested. Jude went in with his rope, saddled the sorrel and threw his reins up over the animal's neck. He swung aboard the short, blocky body and rode up to the house.

Mrs. Travers was on the porch above the kitchen, peeling a batch of potatoes and chatting with Jessie, who sat beside her.

Jude reined up, he didn't get down.

"Seen Nute or the boss around?" he asked.

"They rode off about eight this morning, Jude, They're down on the south range somewhere."

"Where's Miss Travers?"

"So you finally are getting interested in our daughter, are you, Jude? I'm glad. Nell's in town. She left about daylight. I think they're giving some kind of a reception for some woman who's going to have a baby. You know, gifts and all that."

"All right," Jude said.

HE REINED over and rode down across the flats. He crossed one of the small dams in the gully that he himself had built. He was disappointed at not seeing Nute and Travers and tell them what he had learned, what Red Tolliver had stated before he died. But it would have to wait. Things would have to shape themselves. He let the blocky bodied sorrel take its time and didn't get into town until after two o'clock that afternoon. He rode first to Edwina's store, but the woman who now was helping her said that she was out taking one of the afternoon rides in which she now indulged. Nell Travers was with her.

Jude left the sorrel in front of the dress shop and walked down the street. He saw two men, tensed, and then relaxed as he recognized the two Texas Rangers, Hardin and Renner. They came up and shook hands. A man, one of the nesters, leaned against a wall nearby. He eyed the trio with brittle eyes.

"Hello, puncher," Hardin, the younger, greeted quietly. "How's things been going?"

"All right, I guess. Seen Blackie around?"

They looked at him sharply. "You seem kind of nervous, son," Renner, the older man with the hard face, said. "Blackie's out of town. Oughta be back most any time now. We sorta want to talk to him too. Anything special you wanted to see him about?"

Quietly Jude told them everything. Everything from the beginning. He did it aware that the man leaning against the wall had sidled off down the street toward where his horse was racked, that Sol Martin stood in the doorway of his big store, hearing it all.

"So thet's how it is?" Hardin said softly, and pulled thoughtfully at his chin.

"That's how it is," Jude said.

"Going to submit to arrest on charges of killing this Red Tolliver?"

"No. It was justified. He was driving scabbed cattle over onto our range, and he fired the first shot. You can probably find the empty shell. I came in to call Blackie's hand. He warned me and I know what to expect."

"So it's going to be a shoot out?" Hardin asked. "He's a lawman, you know. That means the rangers will have to act."

"I know," Jude answered.

Hardin let some kind of a smile come over his usually taciturn face. He reached up into a shirt pocket and extracted a white paper that had been sticking out of the pocket. Renner spoke up. Renner, the older and an ex-outlaw.

"Son, we've hed our eye on you for a long time now. You've got the makings of a good Texas Ranger. Hardin here is a Captain in the service. He wrote a recommendation to Austin for you to come in with us. There's your commission and your badge."

Hardin had held out the paper in one hand. In the other was a metal badge. "They're yours, Gordon," he said smiling.

"We want you in the service."

Jude looked at them. Slowly he shook his head.

"There's two women involved. One of them was Blackie's girl, and he gave me orders to keep away from her. The other is one he's been trying to marry. He's told her that she ought to keep away from me too. Then there was Tolson, the puncher he shot that night he stampeded the trail herd. He had Tolson murdered. One of the nesters did it, just who I don't know and probably will never learn. But I was one of the outfit, and I still am."

"Loyalty," Hardin said, returning badge and paper to his shirt pocket. "This blind loyalty that cow punchers have for their outfits. That and women. I wish I knew how many men have been shot, imprisoned, and hanged for it. So it's going to be a shootout? You know what that means, of course?"

"Yes, I know," Jude nodded. "But it's got to be that way."

"He's fast, son," Renner said. "He might get you."

"It's still got to be that way," Jude said.

Hardin sighed. He glanced at the rack where their horses stood with rifles in the scabbard.

"Maybe we can get around it," he said to the older man. "Let's go over to Blackie's office and wait for him."

JUDE stood watching them as they crossed to the new red courthouse and disappeared through the tunnel-like entrance of the hallway running north and south. He was aware that Sol was frozen in the doorway of his store, his son beside him; that a murmur had gone up and down the street. It was about then that Blackie and the man who had been leaning against the wall entered town, riding past the old and now deserted sheriff's office. The other had caught him just a short distance out of town and told him everything he had overheard. Blackie knew. He was facing it. Jude saw the careless swing of his hands as he reined up and dropped to the ground in a single, lithe step. The other man hurriedly rode across to the north side of the square where men were watching.

Blackie came southward along the west side of the square, his boots making hard sounds on the dried boardwalk. He was as handsome as he had been that first day when he came out of a barber's chair in Abilene and went back to the gun shop with Jude to pick out the pistol that now lay in the sheath at Jude's right thigh.

Jude shook the gun in its sheath to loosen it and started moving toward him. He came to where Sol Martin stood in the doorway of his store, and suddenly Sol stepped out and threw his fat Jewish arms around him.

"No, no, boy!" he cried out. "No, no, Jude! Don't meet him. He'll kill you. Give me that gun, Jude, and I'll back you up with everything I've got. Don't do it, boy!"

Over in the courthouse office of the sheriff the two rangers stood looking through the west window. The ex-outlaw's left hand was on Hardin's shoulder, clenching it hard. They were watching . . . waiting.

"The kid's going down," Captain Hardin said. "He hasn't got a chance. But he wanted it that way. By God, what a Texas Ranger he would have made! Anyhow, it'll clinch this warrant I have for Blackie being owner of the Eight Cross. He thought the rangers had slid out and were asleep after Durton got killed. He thought I didn't see those rope marks on that rustler's wrists when we held the inquest. And now they're coming down the walk toward each other. That kid's just flung Sol Martin's hands off him and is moving on. If Blackie kills him we'll still have to serve this warrant. And if the kid should come out on top, we've got to run him down and bring him in for downing a lawman. Look—!"

"My money's on the kid," Renner whispered hoarsely.

Over on the boardwalk they had met, coming to a stop some thirty feet distant. The doors of the saloon separated them at a distance of fifteen feet on each side. The doors were noticeably bare of loungers. Blackie paused and the old smile came to his handsome face.

"Hello, pardner," he greeted. "I've been hearing things."

"They get around, I reckon," Jude said. "So you got Red?"

"He talked a little before he died. I think I know now who rattled that slicker that night up in Kansas and shot Tolson when the rattler might have been afraid of who recognized him, but luckily didn't. I think I got a pretty good idea of why you were so set on killing Harrison in Abilene—because you wanted to take over as head of the Nester Pool. I know who hung Grady that night in his cell, hitting him over the head with a gun to stun him before lashing his wrists and swinging him by his belt, and then pulling down on his boots to strangle him. I could have overlooked some of that, Blackie, but you told me to keep away from Edwina and you're trying to marry a girl like Nell. That's what I couldn't take."

"So you're in love with one of them?" sneered Blackie.

"Yes," Jude said. "I'm in love with one of them."

The window of Blackie's office was now up with two men peering through, listening. A half dozen horses at hitch racks switched flies with their tails, dozing lazily. The air was clear, clean. It was exploded by the crash of six shooters. Smoke from black powder roiled up around Jude's stomach as he thumbed shot after shot, for Blackie was down and still trying to fire. Jude took deliberate aim and killed him with a final shot.

He turned. His left arm had a hot branding iron running across it above the elbow while a stream of blood flowed down the skin and dripped from his wrist. He saw the cream sorrel up there a hundred yards away and broke to run. He went past Sol's store, shoving the gun back into its sheath, leaving a man down on the boardwalk. A man who wore a lawman's badge. The man lay on his face and blood was dripping from his shirt front, hitting the dry boards, and slithering off through the wide cracks. He had been shot once, squarely through the badge on his shirt front.

JUDE took his saddle in a bound, grabbing up the reins with his good arm. The face of a frightened woman looked out from Edwina's store. Some strange instinct caused her to cry out, "She an' Miss Nell ain't here. They went riding." He ignored her because there was no time. A few minutes before he could have been a lawman. In those few short minutes he had become a desperado. A man wanted by the law for killing a lawman. He had to get out fast, leaving behind the woman he so desperately loved, the woman he had loved all those long lonesome months.

He rowelled the now rested cream sorrel, biting at his bandana with his teeth and knotting it around his useless left arm. He swung westward, toward the open prairie, and the town and all that it had become to him fell behind. The sorrel's blocky body rocked beneath him as he finished cutting off the blood flow and looked back. He let the animal take its time; that much he had learned about working a cow horse. Now he saw the two riders far behind, the rangers after him, and he saw the two riders ahead too.

He came abreast of them, his left arm afire, bandaged, bloody. He pulled up.

"Jude, what's happened!" Edwina cried out.

He told her and Nell in terse sentences that took seconds. The two pursuing riders were coming hard.

"You killed Blackie?" Nell screamed. "You couldn't have! We were to have been married . . ."

He didn't hear the rest of it. He was looking at Edwina, at the golden hair and lovely face that always had done something to him. He remembered the farm girl in Kansas, now living with his father; and there were seven dead men down before his guns. He looked at the ex-dancehall singer, a few months older than himself.

"Jude, they're coming! *Go, go!*" she cried to him.

"I'm heading for Santa Fe, Mexico territory, first stop, then on into Arizona territory," he said and rode closer. "I guess I've always loved you, Edwina. It looks like goodbye."

"Jude, you can't! I love you, too! But I was Blackie's girl. I'm . . ."

"Meet me there. I'll wait for you."

"Jude, go, go, go! They're coming!"

"I'm waiting for an answer."

"You have it. Wait for me, darling. Oh, Jude, wait for me! Now run for it, *run!*"

He ran for it. Hardin and Renner were rowelling hard down across the flats. They went past the two women with long reins slashing down across the flanks of their fresh horses, burning the wind after the rider astride the cream sorrel with four white feet. They came to a rise and Hardin held up a hand.

"My horse seems to have got a limp," he grunted. "We never coulda caught him."

Renner said, "So's mine. He always was a short winded cuss anyhow," and the ex-outlaw's eyes went to the shirt front of his superior. Hardin had taken a paper from his shirt pocket and was tearing it to bits. He took out the badge and looked at Renner, who reached a hand for it.

Renner said, "I'll betcha I can hit that prairie dog's hole with this," and tossed.

It was a good shot. The badge went rumbling into the bowels of the earth. Renner sat his horse, looking at the distant rider. Something strange was in his face.

"You damned old bloody outlaw," Hardin chuckled. "I'll bet that right this minute your heart's right out there with that desperado kid. I oughta shoot you."

Renner grinned back at him, his hard face softening. "He sure saved us a lot of trouble a second time, Jim. And I reckon the Texas Rangers allus oughta pay their debts."

Ahead of them Jude was still working the cream sorrel, throwing quick glances over his shoulder. He had confidence in the horse that once had thrown him so hard. It was the best of his string.

He turned in the saddle and the breeze struck his face, pushing the hatbrim up, and filling his soul with a strange kind of new happiness.

He bent to the fore and the cream sorrel levelled its neck out, lunging into the west . . . toward Santa Fe and a rendevous with a lovely, golden haired woman.

THE END

FUR KING

By CHARLES RECOUR

Chains aren't always made of steel or iron—Raw "moonshine" makes a stronger bond!

"KING of the Upper Missouri" was the title by which Kenneth McKenzie was known in those long-ago days of the West when fur-trading was the principal industry. His realm was a wide area surrounding the junction of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers; his subjects were the Indians who brought him furs; his power was alcohol.

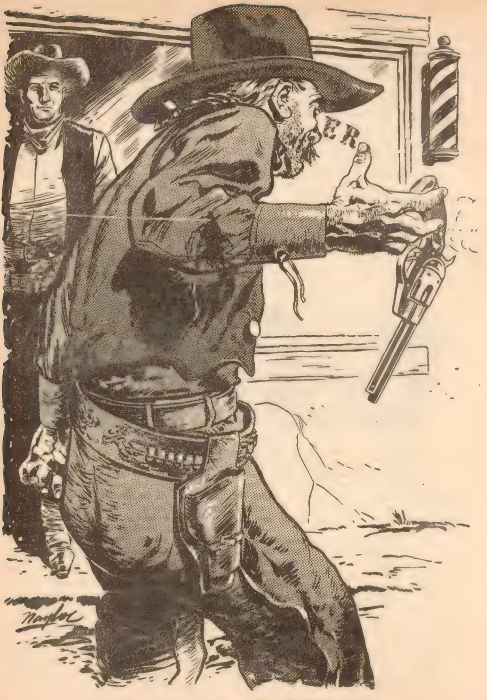
McKenzie was the representative of an eastern fur company which rewarded him according to the profits which he was able to make. He established his trading fort in a territory which had previously been drawn upon by the Hudson Bay Company further to the north. By means of his managerial ability, his personal popularity, and chiefly by his astute and clever system of dispensing whiskey to the Indians, he became the most successful trader on the frontier. He piled up a fortune for himself, and made millions for his company.

He had beads and calico, tobacco and rifles to trade for the valuable mink and beaver and otter furs, but those items became of secondary importance to the Indians, compared to the delights of raw whiskey.

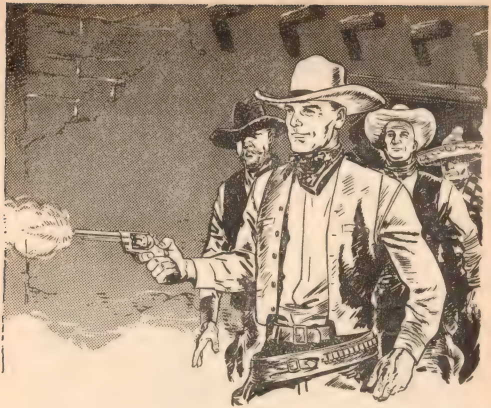
Selling alcohol to the Indians was against the law, but it was only rarely that a United States government official came to this wilderness place, and McKenzie let his employer's urgent demand for profits be his law. If a government investigator headed his way, the "King" was always warned in time to hide the whiskey kegs and dismantle the still. For McKenzie had set up his own still, and manufactured the pale, fiery liquid freely.

He dispensed it carefully. Never enough to satiate the Indians, or make them murderously drunk. He gave them just enough to make them half-insane for more. The less satisfied they were, the harder the redskins would work to trap the fur-bearing animals which they could trade for more whiskey. And so McKenzie corralled the fur trade of a vast area, and considered it fitting and proper that he should be called "King of the Upper Missouri".

* * *



Cameron's shot smashed into Yager's arm, spinning the gun from his hand



BIG MAN

by Guy Archette

Cameron wasn't a big man, but he knew how to handle a six-gun, that great old equalizer!

TEN minutes after he had taken up his stand diagonally across the street from the barber shop, Cameron saw Duke Yager emerge. Casually, Cameron made certain that his holstered .44 hung just so. All the other details had previously been attended to. The gun had been cleaned, oiled, and loaded. It would do the job meant for it.

Cameron straightened up. He seemed tall suddenly, and it wasn't due entirely to the boots with specially built-up heels and the tall-crowned, white Stetson, which he wore to make up for his lack of height. The boyishness went from his angular, brown face. Something hard and cold and merciless came into it. His face became a man's face —and that man a stranger.

Cameron started across the street, moving steadily and deliberately toward Duke Yager.

On both sides of Pine Junction's main thoroughfare little knots of people watched tensely. They had seen Cameron waiting, and knowing what they did of him, they had become silently fascinated spectators. Now there was something of dread in their eyes as they saw Cameron close in on his victim.

Physically, Cameron was a little man. Nobody could have been more acutely aware of this fact than himself. But there was a curious respect in the glances he drew. And he was aware of this also. In another way, then, he was a big man, and the knowledge filled him with the sensation of power and importance he had always craved.

Yager reached the edge of the board sidewalk and stepped down to the street. In the next instant he saw Cameron approaching. He stopped abruptly, and his burly figure stiffened. His hand crept toward his holstered gun, then froze. A play of expression raced across his freshly-shaven, blocky features—alarm, fear, and then a sullen, trapped anger.

A dozen feet away, Cameron came to a stop. He said quietly, "I told you to clear out, Yager."

"Who do you think you are?" the other demanded. "You ain't got no right to order me around."

Cameron's voice remained quiet, though a cold edge crept into it. "I came to this town with a job to do, Yager. That job was to run out Blackie Stroud and his gang. I did it—but the job isn't over yet. I found out that you were a friend of Stroud's. So you're going to get out, too—or get what Stroud got."

"Blackie Stroud had a lot of friends," Yager said defensively. "I wasn't the only one."

"But you're just about the only one who could make trouble like Stroud was doing. I know all about you, Yager. I know every time there's a lynching or some other kind of hell-raising, you're always mixed up in it. I'm not going to take any chances with you. When I do a job, I do it all the way. That means you've got to clear out."

"You . . . you just ain't got no right," Yager argued, desperately seeking some avenue of escape.

Cameron slapped his holster lightly. "This is all the right I need. Don't forget I got called in to get rid of Blackie Stroud. Everybody liked my work fine. I guess that gives me the right to finish what I started out to do."

"But you ain't the town marshal. Nobody can tell me to clear out, unless it's Marshal Perkins."

Cameron shook his head slowly. "That's just why I was sent for in the first place. Perkins couldn't do anything against Stroud—claimed there wasn't any proof. Most likely he'd say the same thing about you. But proof isn't what I need. If I know, that's enough."

CAMERON made a brief, curt gesture. "I don't aim to do any more talking, Yager. I told you to clear out, and I gave you enough time. Now you're going to do it—or go for your gun."

Yager moistened his heavy lips, his deep-set, small eyes darting over the onlookers as though in search of help. The fingers of his right hand, held stiffly away from his gun, twitched and curled nervously. He moved as if intending to walk away—and then, sudden rage surging into his face, he whirled back to Cameron, his hand flashing toward his holster.

Cameron moved very swiftly and very smoothly, with a cool, machine-like precision. He had long ago planned and prepared for this moment. Years before, in fact. As a youngster, other boys had constantly taken advantage of his small stature to tease and bully him. He had fought stubbornly, desperately, but fists often weren't enough. He had come to realize that he would never be respected or admired until he made himself superior in some way. His chance had arrived when he grew old enough to wear a gun. A gun was not only a means of protection; it was also an "equalizer," something that made a small man as dangerous as a big one.

Cameron had spent long hours in practice at drawing his gun and in shooting at all sorts of targets under widely different conditions. He had painstakingly learned the little gunfighter's tricks that often meant the difference between life and death. He had adapted each bit of knowledge to his own methods, and the result, combined with an inherent quickness of mind and eye, was a blurred rapidity of draw and an uncanny accuracy of aim that few could equal.

His efforts had won him the respect and admiration he wanted. He had developed an enviable reputation as a gunfighter, and it was this reputation that had led to his being called upon to run out Blackie Stroud after all other attempts had failed. Stroud, however, had taken a long chance—and had gone down under Cameron's blazing guns. Those of his gang remaining had wisely decided to leave Pine Junction.

Now Cameron faced Duke Yager, who was the only link with the Stroud gang left.

Cameron's gun seemed to leap into his hand as though possessing a life of its own. He fired an instant ahead of Yager. His bullet smashed into the other's arm, making his shot go wild. Cameron wasn't shooting to kill, something he seldom did. He was shooting to punish. Yager's life would be spared—but Yager had been warned, and he hadn't heeded the warning. Therefore, Cameron had told himself grimly, Yager would have to pay.

Again Cameron fired. His second bullet struck Yager high in the shoulder, spinning him half around. His third bullet grazed Yager's ear. His fourth knocked the man's hat into the dusty street.

Yager stood swaying, his features dazed and filled with pain. All the fight had left him. He looked sick and cowed.

Cameron gestured with his gun. "Clear out, Yager. I'll give you enough time to get patched up, then hit the trail. If you ever show your face in Pine Junction again, you'll know what to expect."

Yager said nothing. He bent slowly to pick up his fallen hat and gun. Clutching them weakly, he stumbled off down the street.

CAMERON holstered his .44 and glanced at the groups of watching townsfolk. They would be grinning in approval, of course. There would be cheers and waves—acknowledgment of the fact that he was a big man in every way, respected, admired.

But there were no cheers or waves. The crowd was silent—hostile, Cameron realized in bewildered dismay. Under the impact of his eyes, the people were beginning to turn away and leave.

As Cameron stared, a girl pushed her way through the departing figures. She was slim and dainty, with vivid blue eyes and shining light-brown hair that fell in tumbled curls about her slender shoulders.

Cameron recognized Stella Dixon immediately. A cold knot formed in his stomach as he saw that her pert, oval features were angry and scornful. His bewilderment grew. What was wrong with everyone all at once?

Stella Dixon was the reason Cameron had lingered behind in Pine Junction. She was also the reason why he had jumped at the foreman job offered him by her father, Frank Dixon, owner of the Square D. It was Frank Dixon, who as head of a citizen's committee, had sent for Cameron to run out the Stroud gang. Cameron had done that—and had become acquainted with Stella. They had gone riding together, and together they had attended dances and meetings. Cameron had come to feel confident that he had a strong edge on his most serious rival, Brad Murdock, tall, husky and handsome owner of the Bar M.

But now Stella's small face seemed filled with a scathing dislike. Sharp words rushed from her lips.

"What's the matter with you, Jeff Cameron? Don't you know when to stop? I know Dad asked for your help, but that doesn't give you any right to pick on everyone who ever had anything to do with Blackie Stroud!"

"Duke Yager was a trouble-maker," Cameron protested. "He was a friend of Stroud's, and that means he'd be a friend of any other ornery maverick who came along. I couldn't take chances with him."

"Duke Yager wasn't any worse than a dozen other men in town," Stella snapped. "The way you shot him up was downright mean. It . . . why, it was the most hard-hearted thing I've ever seen!"

"I didn't kill him," Cameron said doggedly. "Anyway, Stella, I don't see why you should bother yourself about Yager."

"It isn't just Duke Yager. There's the other men you chased out of town just because they were friends of Blackie Stroud. People are getting tired of it, but they're afraid to say anything. The trouble with you, Jeff Cameron, is that you don't know when to quit. You want people to keep clapping their hands for you. It looks like you're nothing but a glory-hunter."

Cameron started to blurt a defense, but a feeling almost like sickness surged over him. Abruptly, devastatingly, he realized that Stella was right. He *was* a glory-hunter. He had allowed his desire for the praises of the crowd to carry him too far.

STELLA went on in a rush, her blue eyes misted with tears. "And not only that, Jeff Cameron, it looks like you're a bully as well. You're taking advantage of the fact that you can use a gun faster than other men. If it wasn't for that, I don't think you'd be so sure of yourself. You . . . you're *hiding* behind your gun, that's what you're doing! And I'm glad I found out in time!"

With a final glare, the girl whirled and hurried away down the street. Cameron numbly watched her go, his thoughts whirling in confusion. He was only dimly aware of it when another figure appeared before him. After a moment he recognized the long, leathery face of Marshal Jeb Perkins.

Perkins seemed uncomfortable. He was a tall, bony man, his clothes baggy and wrinkled. A huge gob of chewing tobacco bulged one of his whisker-studded cheeks. He said hesitantly:

"You got to cut out your fightin', Jeff. Folks is startin' to complain about it. Ain't none of them liked Yager, but they're sort of gettin' worried you'll commence pickin' on law-abidin' citizens. Next time you jump somebody with no call 'cept what you think, I reckon I'll have to run you in."

Cameron stared at the marshal dazedly, the last fragments of his world crashing about him. Perkins shifted his gob of chewing tobacco, blinked a moment, then turned and ambled off in the direction of the town jail, shaking his bony head.

Cameron finally roused into motion. He walked slowly down the street, his eyes on the ground. Big man, he thought with bitter irony. He had been wrong. Bully! Glory-hunter! That was what people thought of him.

A couple of horsemen cantered past, swerving to avoid hitting Cameron, and staring at him curiously as they went by. Then a heavy wagon approached. The driver had to shout before Cameron awoke fully to where he was and moved out of the way.

Nothing mattered, Cameron told himself. His entire scheme of things had crashed into ruins. People no longer trusted or admired him. The only girl who had ever mattered held him in contempt. And this because he had done what he had thought was clearly his duty.

Reaching the hitchrack in front of the Frontier Hotel, where he had left his horse, Cameron mounted leadenly. As he was about to jerk at the reins, he heard a familiar voice call his name. He turned to see Zack Beech ride up. Beech was red-headed and chubby, with freckled features that were usually widened in an impish grin. The grin was absent now.

"Where's Miss Dixon?" Beech asked Cameron.

"Guess she rode the buckboard home by herself," Cameron said, shrugging dully. He glanced at the other. "Hear what happened?"

"Just a few minutes ago." Beech said nothing more immediately. He followed as Cameron urged his mount into motion. He worked for the Square D also, and in their duties together, he and Cameron had become firm friends. They had accompanied Stella Dixon into town earlier that day, to pick up mail and a few needed supplies.

The two rode silently out of town. At last, on the road leading toward the Square D, Beech glanced at Cameron and shook his head in sympathy.

"It was a rotten thing to happen, Jeff."

"What? Me shooting Yager?"

"No. I mean everything that happened after that. Far as I'm concerned, Yager had it coming to him. He was always mixed up in some kind of devilment—foxy like, so you couldn't catch him at it. I can't figure out why folks should stick up for him."

"They weren't sticking up for him exactly. I know that now. It's what you call the principle of the thing."

"I see what you mean," Beech said. He hesitated a moment. "Jeff, is Miss Dixon sore at you?"

"Yeah." Cameron briefly explained the reasons that had led Stella Dixon to ride back to the ranch alone.

BEECH shook his head. "Soon as Brad Murdock hears about it, he'll be hanging around the ranch again. Murdock's always been sweet on Miss Dixon, but you had him cut off for a while. He'll jump at his chances now."

Cameron scowled at the picture that Beech's words formed in his mind. It was true, he realized. And the fact that he didn't like the good-looking owner of the Bar M in no way helped matters. There had always seemed to be something too smooth and artificial about Murdock.

"What do you figure on doing about what happened, Jeff?" Beech asked after another silence.

"I almost feel like packing up and hitting the trail," Cameron said.

"Heck no, Jeff!" Beech cried in swift protest.

"I said almost," Cameron reminded. "I don't quit easy, Zack, and I'm going to see this thing through. You know, I think folks are right in a way. I guess I was stretching my rope a little too far —even if I was right about Yager."

Beech's impish grin flashed. "That's the stuff, Jeff!"

Cameron felt his burdens lift a trifle. He'd walk easy for a while. He'd show Stella and the others that he really wasn't a bully or a glory-hunter. And by weathering the storm of disapproval, he'd show that he really was a big man after all.

A short time later, Cameron and Beech were on Square D land, riding toward the ranch buildings. The Square D was a large ranch, attractive, well-managed, and more prosperous than most. Cameron had enjoyed working for Frank Dixon, though with the opportunity to be near Stella, he hadn't thought of it as work. But there would be a difference now, Cameron thought somberly.

He was unsaddling his horse at the corral when he noticed Frank Dixon approaching from the direction of the ranch house. Dixon was elderly, though his wiry form was still straight and quick. He had thick white hair and eyes as blue as Stella's own. The years had seamed and weathered his features, emphasizing the imprints of kindliness and warmth which Cameron had found so characteristic of him.

Seeing that he had been observed, Dixon gestured to Cameron. "Like to talk to you a minute, Jeff."

Cameron strode over, filled with uneasy foreboding. But this began to fade when Dixon dropped an arm about his shoulders and spoke quietly and intensively.

"Stella told me about you shooting Duke Yager, Jeff. She was kind of worked up about it, feeling you did wrong. Yager's a polecat and deserved what he got, but in a way Stella's right. Besides, it seems that a lot of folks in town feel like she does. So I reckon it'd be a good idea if you sort of walked soft from now on. What do you say, Jeff?"

Cameron nodded. "I've been thinking about it, and I'm ready to admit I made a mistake. I was only trying to finish what I started, but I guess I was in too much of a hurry."

"Good boy!" Dixon approved. "I know I can count on you, Jeff. I've been hoping I didn't make a mistake when I sent for you to come to Pine Junction, and then hired you to ramrod for me."

Cameron said hesitantly, "Does Stella sound . . . well, like she was mad at me for good?"

The rancher looked away. "She's pretty headstrong. Maybe that's what comes of not having a mother to bring her up. But maybe things will blow over."

Cameron felt sick. The thought of losing Stella permanently was unbearable.

Yet Dixon's behavior seemed to point to that.

The ranchcer patted Cameron's arm uncomfortably. "There's nothing I can do, Jeff, but I'll be hoping for the best. I never had a son, and I was kind of figuring on . . . well . . . " Dixon shrugged and let his voice trail off. "Just take things slow and easy, Jeff." With a final pat, he turned and strode back to the ranch house.

CAMERON gazed after him for a long moment, his thoughts gray and heavy. Then he started for the bunkhouse, his steps slow and plodding.

After supper that evening, Cameron strode outside to take a short walk and smoke a cigarette before turning in. The sun was sinking behind distant hills on the horizon, drawing a glorious blanket of rose and gold clouds in its wake. Long shadows were spreading over the land, and Cameron didn't notice the two figures beneath a group of pines until one of them spoke.

"Have you added spying on me to your list of bad habits, Jeff Cameron?" It was Stella's voice, coldly sarcastic.

Cameron became aware of her, then. Her companion was a man, tall and husky. Murdock, Cameron knew instinctively.

The owner of the Bar M added his voice to the girl's. "Cameron, eh? I want a word with you, mister."

Cameron nodded faintly and stood quietly motionless, waiting as the other strode toward him. Murdock had sandy hair and was good-looking in a bluff, rugged way. He looked well-dressed in a striped brown suit that had evidently been tailored in the East.

Murdock towered over Cameron as he came to a stop several feet away. "I heard what happened in town today, Cameron."

A retort that it was none of Murdock's business rushed to Cameron's lips, but he forced it back. He nodded again and remained silent. He knew Stella was watching intently, and he didn't want to say or do anything that would add to her dislike for him.

Murdock went on, "You shot up Duke Yager and ordered him to get out of town, Cameron. I don't like that, and I'll tell you why. Duke Yager's working for me."

"Working for you!" Cameron said in surprise. As far as he had known, Yager had no apparent means of support and seemed just to loaf about in town, slyly inserting his thick fingers into whatever trouble might be brewing.

"What's wrong with that?" Murdock demanded.

"I didn't say anything was wrong with it," Cameron replied with deliberate mildness.

"You sounded like it was a dirty trick of some kind."

"Maybe my voice isn't in shape today."

Murdock scowled. "Well, listen, Cameron, Duke Yager isn't going to leave town, and furthermore, I want you to leave him alone. I hired him a couple of days ago, to do odd jobs for me. He was taking care of some business in town for me when you jumped him."

Cameron maintained his silence with difficulty. He sensed that Murdock was taking advantage of the situation in Pine Junction that had arisen over the shooting of Duke Yager. The rancher obviously knew that Cameron would now avoid doing anything which would make the situation worse. And there was Stella. Most likely Murdock knew also that Cameron would sidestep actions that would serve to widen the rift between himself and the girl.

CAMERON raged inwardly. It all boiled down to the fact that his hands were very thoroughly tied. He couldn't revenge himself for Murdock's insultingly domineering manner, by challenging the man to draw, without at the same time exchanging the frying pan for the fire.

Thumbs looped in the pockets of his stylish vest, Murdock rocked back on his heels. "I guess we understand each other, Cameron."

"I guess we do," Cameron said softly.

"One thing more," Murdock said. "I don't like to have people spying on me. And neither does Miss Dixon."

Cameron made no anwer. He met Murdock's eyes in a long steady look of such burning intensity that the rancher involuntarily glanced away. Then, blindly, Cameron whirled and stalked back toward the bunkhouse, blood roaring and pounding in his ears. He didn't dare to remain another instant. He knew he might lose control and tear into Murdock like a maddened beast.

Cameron saw little of Stella after that. As the days passed, he felt their separation with growing sharpness. He found himself remembering the mornings they had ridden together and the evenings when they had walked along the road, or had spent deep in talk on the steps of the ranch house. These recollections came to him with a sensation of pain that was all the more acute because of his increasing certainty that he would never spend another minute with Stella again.

For the girl was seeing more and more of Brad Murdock. Now it was with Murdock that she went riding and walking, with Murdock that she attended the occasional dances, parties, and meetings. And she seemed to be enjoying herself. Often Cameron heard her laughter tinkle from the ranch house, and the sound of it brought a ghostly parade of old memories that moved softly and yet with a deep hurting through his mind.

Frequently Cameron encountered Murdock in his duties about the ranch. Murdock seemed to have a great deal of spare time, and he spent the major part of it at the Square D. His face, when he managed to catch Cameron's glance, was smug, assured, and mocking. His grin hinted of things that brought a red mist of fury to Cameron's eyes.

What made matters all the more tormenting was that there was nothing Cameron could do. An attack on Murdock would only serve to confirm the belief that Cameron possessed a mean, ugly nature, which seemed to be held by Stella and the people of Pine Junction.

Dixon and Beech apparently understood Cameron's feelings. Again and again they cautioned him to keep his head. But presently Beech grew silent on that score. He performed Cameron's business duties in town now, since Cameron preferred to remain away from the scene of his downfall, and he had learned things that had changed his outlook.

One morning Cameron and Beech were on a distant part of the ranch, hunting for strays. Alone, and with Beech's presence lending comfort, Cameron's turbulent emotions broke their restraining walls.

"Damn Murdock!" he spat. "Zack, I tell you I can't stand any more of the looks Murdock's been giving me. I know part of the way I feel is because he's keeping steady company with Stella—but, damn it, Zack, he doesn't have to keep looking at me like a cat that just ate a barrelful of mice. One of these days—and plenty soon—I'm going to make him draw. I know it'll end everything for me, but with Murdock full of lead, I'll be glad to foot the bill."

Beech looked intently into the distance. He said slowly, "Maybe it's a good idea at that, Jeff."

Cameron stared. "Huh! What's got into you? All along you've been telling me to keep my horns in."

"I know," Beech said. "But I've

been hearing things in town that have changed my mind."

"What sort of things?" Cameron demanded swiftly. "About Murdock?"

"About you, Jeff. Said by Murdock. I know it'll make a worse mess to tell you about it, but I wouldn't be a real friend if I tried to keep it back. This is something you ought to know, Jeff. And anyhow, I reckon you'd find out sooner or later."

"What do you mean? Tell me, Zack!"

"Well, Murdock's been going around saying you've turned yellow. He claims he's got you buffaloed and eating out of his hand. And, Jeff, he says he told you to keep out of town, which is why you haven't been showing your face."

"He said that?" Cameron spoke softly, musingly.

And he smiled.

SEEING that smile, Beech looked away with a shudder.

There was a silence. The horses were treading their way among scattered rocks at the foot of a line of low hills. From the hills the land sloped gently into a long, narrow valley, studded with brush and pines. The sky above was cloudless and very blue. A cool breeze drifted in vagrant gusts from the north.

Beech said finally, "Jeff, I've been thinking about Murdock saying those things, and it doesn't make sense somehow. Murdock has brains enough to know his tongue will get him into serious trouble. The only explanation seems to be that he *wants* you to jump him."

"Maybe he's tired of living," Cameron said darkly.

"Maybe he's tired of something else, Jeff."

"I don't savvy."

"Maybe he's tired of waiting for Miss Dixon to make up her mind about marrying him. He's been asking her, you see. There's some gossip about it in town. And it seems like Miss Dixon's been putting him off."

Beech paused a moment, and Cameron watched him, tense and impatient. It last Beech said:

"Now why should she keep putting Murdock off, Jeff? Because there's somebody else she's interested in, that's why. Somebody who's been mighty quiet lately, and seems to have turned over a new leaf."

Cameron drew in his breath sharply. In his eyes was a reflection of the incredulous hope that blazed into his mind.

"Of course, Murdock would know why Miss Dixon's been giving him the run-around. And he would want to do something to set her against you permanent. That's why he's telling lies about you. So you'll jump him. I wouldn't put it past Murdock to fix the whole thing up, so he'll come out of it with a whole skin when you do."

That was true enough, Cameron knew. Murdock had set a clever trap, and without Zack Beech's cool head, Cameron might have rushed blindly into it.

"Well?" Beach said after a short silence. "Still want to make Murdock draw against you, Jeff?"

"No," Cameron said gently. "Not now, Zack. I see—"

Cameron broke off as something droned and stirred air past his chin. A moment later the flat, distant report of a rifle sounded on the air.

"Down, Zack!" Cameron shouted. "Somebody's shooting at us from the hills."

Flattening himself in the saddle, Cameron spurred his horse into wild flight, making himself as difficult a target as possible. Beech did likewise, and for several seconds that seemed individual, nightmarish eternities, they jolted over the rough ground, while whining bits of leaden death hungrily sought their lives.

CAMERON'S .44 was in his hand, and as he moved, his slitted eyes raked the brush covering the hill slopes. He caught the faint glitter of sunlight on a rifle barrel. In almost the same instant, he aimed and fired. He couldn't tell whether he had scored a hit, but the rifle went silent.

"He's up there, Zack!" Cameron pointed briefly with his gun, craning around to look at Beech. "Split. We'll go after him. I'll take one side, you the other."

Beech nodded without hesitating. He had his own gun in his hand. Now he reined his horse in the direction Cameron had indicated. Together they charged up the hill, firing tentative shots as they went.

The bushwhacker hadn't been hit, Cameron learned. The man snapped one more shot at him before he evidently decided that the situation was becoming too warm for comfort. Cameron saw a flash of color among the brush, and a moment later a man's figure darted over the crest of the hill.

"Hurry, Zack!" Cameron called. "He's running for it!"

A moment later Cameron crested the hill and started down the other side. His quarry had reached the bottom and was vaulting into the saddle of a waiting horse. For an instant the man stared up at Cameron. Though small with distance, the other's bearded, dark features, strained and desperate, sent a shock of recognition through Cameron. He knew the man who had tried to kill him. Mormon Cole!

Mormon Cole had been a member of the Stroud gang.

And then, even as Cameron stared numbly, the fugitive dug frantic spurs into his horse and was riding madly away amid a small cloud of dust and scattered pebbles.

Belatedly, Cameron raised his gun to fire. The hammer clicked on an empty shell.

Beech came pounding up to Cameron, reining in his mount sharply. "Jeff—he's getting away!"

Cameron muttered, "That was Mormon Cole, Zack."

Surprise flared into Beech's chubby features. "Mormon Cole! Why, Jeff, he was one of the Stroud gang. I thought those left of the gang were clean out of the country."

"So did I," Cameron said. "But it looks like we were wrong. Come on, Zack!"

Cameron and Beech resumed the pursuit, but Cole, riding with reckless speed, was already a good distance away. He increased the distance rapidly, and then Cameron and Beech lost sight of him.

Cameron finally pulled his horse to a stop. "It's no use, Zack. We'd have to follow his trail now, and he'd be getting farther away all the time. He'll keep running as long as he thinks we're after him."

Beech nodded reluctantly, and then turned to follow as Cameron started to retrace the path they had taken in their pursuit of Cole.

"It looks like Cole was laying for you, Jeff," Beech said presently. "That must mean he has a hideout somewhere around here. And I'll bet the others are with him. The Stroud gang always stuck together."

"You may be right," Cameron returned. "If Cole and the others do have a hideout around here, I'd certainly like to know where it is."

BEECH slapped his plump thigh in sudden excitement. "Why not send out old Pete Van Horn, the handyman at the ranch? Pete used to be a cavalry scout and can read sign like a book. He'll track down Cole if anybody can."

Cameron nodded, his face cold. "Old Pete's as good as hunting sign right now!"

Later, back at the bunkhouse, Cameron and Beech sought out Van Horn and explained what they wanted done. The old ex-scout was eager. He was a small, wizened man, with wrinkled, leathery features that had seen more than sixty years of sun and wind. Cameron described the location where the attempt on his life had taken place, and Van Horn promised to set out the very first thing in the morning.

"If they're on this ol' earth, I'll find 'em!" Van Horn said in his thin, piping voice.

Three days passed while Van Horn searched. In the afternoon of the third day a rider from Pine Junction came thundering into the Square D with news that created immediate and vast interest. The bank in town had been robbed of close to thirty-thousand dollars. And not only that—one of the robbers had been recognized, his mask having slipped during the hold-up.

Numerous witnesses had identified the man as Mormon Cole.

And then, while Cameron, Beech, and the other men at the Square D bunkhouse were still in a stir of excitement over the report, old Pete Van Horn hurried in, his wrinkled face split by a broad grin of triumph.

"I found the hideout!" he announced breathlessly to Cameron. "Told you I would!"

Cameron caught the old man's arm eagerly. "Where, Pete? Tell me—quick!"

"Guess, son. Sorry I got to prod you—but this is good."

Cameron tried several quick guesses, failing with each of them. Finally he shook Van Horn impatiently.

"Cuss you, Pete, out with it! Where is the hideout, anyway?"

"On the Bar M!" Van Horn said. "There's a big ravine on Bar M land, up near Spook Pass, and at one end of the ravine is a small cabin. The men I tracked are in that cabin."

For a moment Cameron was stunned. Then he fell to pacing the floor feverishly. The bunkhouse was in an uproar. Almost all the Square D punchers were present, and they had known both that Van Horn had been tracking Mormon Cole, and the Cole and a group of henchmen had robbed the bank in Pine Junction that very afternoon.

At last Cameron whirled back to Van Horn. "Pete, are you sure about all this—absolutely sure?"

"Sure?" Van Horn echoed indignantly. "Why, dagnab it, I'm positive! I saw Mormon Cole go into the cabin with my own eyes. This afternoon he and a bunch of others came ridin' in from somewhere, talkin' and laughin' like they just struck it rich."

"They did," Cameron said grimly. "Cole and the others robbed the bank."

"And we know just where they are!" Beech put in, while Van Horn gaped in surprise. "We can grab them all before they can even think about making plans for a getaway. What are we waiting for?"

The question was taken up by almost all the other men in the bunkhouse. They were eager to grasp at the chance of adventure and excitement.

CAMERON saw at once that it would be difficult if not actually impossible to stop them. The only thing left to do was to work out a plan that would insure reasonable chances of success.

At Cameron's suggestion, Van Horn drew a rough map of the ravine and cabin. A plan of attack was quickly worked out, and men were assigned to accomplish the various details of it. Then weapons were hurriedly though thoroughly examined, ammunition and other supplies gathered, and finally the men poured from the bunkhouse to saddle up.

Frank Dixon might have objected had he been present to witness the proceedings, but he had left with Stella a few hours before, to attend a dance in Pine Junction. Cameron knew that Stella's presence at the dance meant that Murdock would also be there.

But he didnt' let that concern him now. There was more serious business at hand. Men would die if anything went wrong.

A short time later Cameron was leading his unofficial posse of Square D punchers toward Spook Pass.

It was early evening now, and dark, but a three-quarter moon was coming up over the hills. Cameron and the others made good time. The men had grown quiet. Their impulsiveness had faded, and though enthusiasm still remained with them, it was more grim and determined.

Near Spook Pass, Cameron separated the men, reminding each of their assigned task. As stealthily as drifting shadows, they moved into the ravine. One by one, they then silently dismounted and crept toward the cabin on foot. They were in effect a circle of human flesh backed by ready guns, a circle that drew slowly tighter.

The distance separating them from the cabin lessened. Inside the building a guitar twanged, and a man's baritone lifted in a discordant snatch of song. Another man laughed raucously, and a mutter of voices followed.

A part of Cameron began to relax. No guards had thus far been encountered. It seemed that Mormon Cole and the others had been too confident of the secrecy of their hideaway to post guards. It was a mistake they would regret.

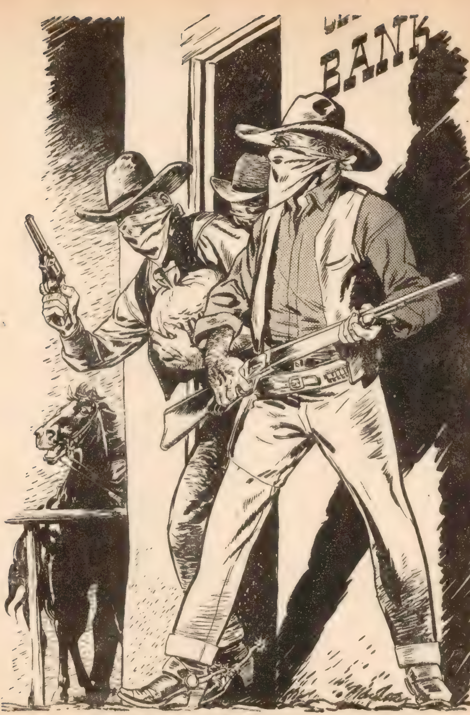
Cameron now put the second phase of his plan into action. He waved a white handkerchief in a pre-arranged signal. Word was passed around quietly to make certain that every man knew what was taking place.

The circle had become stationary. The rest was up to Cameron, Beech, and two other men. To them fell the most dangerous part of the entire plan. They were to creep directly up to the cabin, covering the men inside from windows and door. If anything went wrong, they were to fall flat along the outside walls, while their companions behind them sent a covering barrage of shots into the cabin, keeping the robbers at bay. Then Cameron and his group were to set fire to the cabin, carrying kerosene-soaked rags for this purpose.

THAT never became necessary, however. Cameron and the others reached the cabin without difficulty. And as Cameron kicked in the door, Beech and the two accompanying punchers thrust their guns through the glass of the windows.

Mormon Cole was drinking from a jug. He dropped it in dismayed surprise as Cameron burst into the room. Then, frantically, his hand darted for the gun in his belt.

Cameron shot Cole through the shoulder. Warning shots from the windows halted the others in their laggard efforts to duplicate the action.



Cole and the others robbed the bank in town and made a quick get-away

Among them was Duke Yager. It developed later that Yager had been in on the robbery, his bandaged arm and shoulder concealed in a muffling coat.

"Reach for the ceiling!" Cameron snapped. "You're all covered. Try anything and you die."

None of the captives attempted resistance. And as hands rose slowly into the air, Cameron knew it was over.

Over, that is, except for one final thing.

The robbers were each bound securely. Then, with the bank loot safely in Beech's hands, Cameron prepared to leave.

"I'll leave it for you to get the gang into town, Zack," he told the other. "As for me, I'm on my way."

"But where are you going?" Beech demanded in perplexity.

"To town. But I'm in a hurry, Zack!"

Running back to where he had left his horse, Cameron leaped into the saddle and spurred the animal into a swift gallop toward Pine Junction.

The dance was being held at the Lodge Hall, Cameron found. The wail of a violin, rising over the wheezing of an accordion and the tinny clatter of a piano, greeted him as he strode inside. The large, paper-decorated, but otherwise plain room echoed to the stamping of feet as couples danced. Voices raised in laughter underscored the continuous murmur of conversation.

Cameron bought an admission ticket, but brushed unheedingly past as the cashier requested that he check his gun. The man attempted to follow him, then gave up for the moment as Cameron quickly lost himself in the crowd. His features set and cold, Cameron began searching.

The man he wanted to see was a tall, husky man, a man with sandy hair and a stylish suit.

Cameron found him within a few minutes.

Murdock was standing at one end of the hall with a group of friends. He held a half-empty glass of beer in one hand and was laughing heartily at a joke that had just been made. The merriment left his features when he saw Cameron.

The others saw Cameron, too, then. From Cameron and Murdock a sphere of silence formed and swelled and spread throughout the entire hall.

The fiddle scraped into sudden silence, and the accordion expired with a sharp wheeze. The piano clattered a moment longer, then it also went into silence.

"It's Jeff Cameron!" a whisper went up.

"Jeff Cameron's here!"

"There's going to be trouble—bad trouble!"

CAMERON smiled. "Here I am, Murdock. Jeff Cameron, the bully and glory-hunter. The man who's turned yellow. The man you buffaloed and made to eat out of your hand. The man you ordered to keep out of town. Well, I'm in town right now, Murdock. What are you going to do about it?"

"You . . . you're drunk," Murdock said. "And you're wearing a gun. Guns aren't allowed at this dance." The rancher looked over Cameron's head, as though seeking someone who would immediately remove Cameron for the offense of wearing a gun in the hall.

Nobody appeared.

The whispers had died. The heavy silence was broken by a woman's nervous giggle.

Cameron said, "Don't waste words, Murdock. Let's keep things to the point. I want to know if you admit calling me yellow and having me eat out of your hand and telling me to keep out of town. I want to know, Murdock. Give me a straight answer."

Murdock glanced about him. He moistened his lips. "All right," he said abruptly, his voice loud in the stillness. "I admit it. And it's true!"

"Then it's also true that you're going to pay for lying," Cameron said softly.

"I'm not wearing a gun," Murdock said quickly. "Even if I was, everybody knows I wouldn't stand a chance against you. It would be outright murder."

Cameron shook his head. "I wouldn't take advantage of you, Murdock. I'm going to give you all the odds you want. I'm a bigger man than you are—and I'm going to prove it."

Cameron unbuckled his gunbelt and let it drop to the floor. He tossed his hat aside and unbuttoned his jacket. He said:

"We'll make it fists, Murdock. "Where'll you take your beating—here, or outside?"

There was a cry of sudden protest, and the figure of a girl rushed forward. Stella caught Cameron's arms.

"Jeff—no! You can't do this. It wouldn't be fair. Brad's bigger than you are."

"He isn't," Cameron said. "I'm going to prove that."

Stella's face twisted. "Jeff, are you out of your mind?"

Frank Dixon suddenly appeared. He said quietly, "You can't do this, Jeff. Murdock weighs over sixty pounds more than you, and he's about a foot taller. You wouldn't stand a chance against him in a fist fight."

"I'm willing to risk that," Cameron said.

A growing babble deepened into an uproar of voices in the hall. The crowd, excited by the prospects of a fight, was taking sides. It soon became apparent that there were more rooters for Cameron than for Murdock. But Murdock's cohorts were eagerly urging him on.

The rancher's mouth tightened vengefully. He nodded and began removing his coat. "We'll have it out here," he told Cameron.

"Brad!" Stella cried. "If you go through with this, I'm never going to have anything to do with you again!"

"This little rooster is asking for it," Murdock said. "And he is going to get it. I'm going to beat him to a pulp!"

THE yells of the crowd drowned out Stella's pleas. Dixon put his arm gently about her shoulders and drew her away, shaking his head sadly.

A space was quickly cleared in the middle of the hall. If Cameron's challenge had occurred anywhere but at the dance, the crowd would not have permitted it to be accepted by Murdock. But emotions were turbulent with whiskey and music and the activity of dancing. The crowd wanted excitement, novelty.

The crowd did not quite realize that it also wanted blood.

In the cleared circle, with faces ringing them like the yawning muzzles of hungry wolves, Cameron faced Murdock. A self-appointed referee took charge of the preliminary details. And then the signal was given for the fight to begin.

Murdock immediately rushed in, swinging his large right fist in a savage uppercut at Cameron's jaw. Cameron moved his head slightly, allowing the blow to pass without harm. His own right sank deep into Murdock's middle. But then the force of the rancher's charge and his own greater weight spun Cameron around, out of balance. Cameron fell to one knee.

Murdock, however, had been dazed, even if slightly. He was unable to follow up his advantage at once. And by the time he had fully recovered, Cameron was once more on his feet, alert and ready.

Again and again, Murdock rushed, throwing his fists in futile blows at Cameron. Cameron dodged and ducked, whirled and danced. He was as elusive as a flame flickering among burning logs. Repeatedly, he escaped vicious blows that would have meant broken bones had they landed.

He knew he wouldn't be able to keep it up. But he didn't intend to wait too long.

Suddenly, seizing an opportunity, Cameron closed in on Murdock, wrapping his arms in a fierce embrace about the larger man. The crowd shrieked. Over the noise, Cameron hissed swift words into Murdock's ear.

"Mormon Cole . . . captured. And Yager. Back Beech and . . . and Square D riders bringing them to town. With bank money."

Murdock froze into rigidity, and Cameron spoke faster. "Zack Beech will tell. You were behind Stroud gang. You were hiding Mormon Cole and others on Bar M land. You planned the bank robbery with Cole. Yager spied out the details for the robbery."

"You lie!" Murdock husked.

"Ravine near Spook Pass," Cameron whispered, his strength draining. "Cabin in ravine. Cole thinks . . . you sold him out. He'll pull you in with him."

A moment longer Murdock remained rigid. Then he thrust Cameron away from him, knocking the smaller man to the floor. With a wild glance at the staring and now silent crowd, he suddenly lowered his head and charged recklessly into the packed bodies blocking his path to the door.

For a moment the throng resisted mindlessly. Then it opened to let him past.

Murdock dashed outside. A moment later the sound of departing hoofbeats arose.

Cameron didn't hear them. He found himself sitting on the floor, and Stella's arms were about his shoulders. Her tear-streaked face was anxious.

"Jeff! Are you hurt?"

"Some," Cameron said with an instinctive sagacity. "But it's all right, Stella."

"I'm sorry, Jeff," she said miserably. "I didn't really mean what I said to you that day. And I never really cared for Brad Murdock. He . . . he's a *bully!* I'm glad you beat him. I . . . I'm proud of you!"

Cameron almost missed that, for the crowd was yelling again, shouting in wild approval. The noise told him that he was a big man once more—this time in the only way that really mattered.

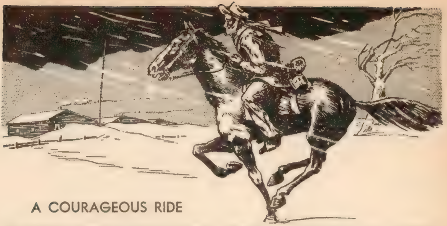
THE END

A LONG RIDE

ONE of the longest single runs ever made on the Pony Express, which operated through the West in the middle nineteenth century, was made by young Buffalo Bill Cody. High-spirited, gallant and dependable, he was one of the most popular riders of the pony route.

One day he arrived at the end of his run to find that the man authorized to carry the mail sack on from there was dead. Immediately then, unwilling that the tradition of speedy mail service via Pony Express should be broken, he mounted a fresh horse and rode the eighty-five miles to Rocky Ridge Station, where waited the man who was to ride the next relay.

He had ridden continuously for over three hundred miles, at a speed averaging fifteen miles an hour. —*by John Crail*



A COURAGEOUS RIDE

THERE has never been a feat in the annals of the West more extraordinary than that of Portugee Phillips in December, 1866. He braved hostile Indians, blinding snow, and subzero temperatures on a ride of well over two hundred miles, to save a garrison.

It was just after the famous Fetterman Massacre, in which Colonel Fetterman and his entire band of eighty men, while on a short expedition away from Fort Kearney, were ambushed and killed by Sioux Indians on the warpath. The commander of the fort, Colonel Carrington, realized that the Indians were in a dangerous mood, and that, shorthanded as it was, the fort was in great jeopardy.

Then came a great blizzard, and the soldiers rejoiced, in spite of the bitter cold, for the Indians would have to delay their attack. But as the snow piled higher and higher, it was soon evident that the storm might not be such a blessing after all. The Indians would soon be able to walk over the high-piled drifts right into the fort.

Shoveling began, and was carried on in relays, without intermission. The task was a frightful one, for the temperature had dropped to thirty below zero, and the snow whipped furiously at the freezing men.

The situation was serious. Carrington asked for a volunteer to go to Laramie for help. The men shook their heads in dismay. Even the experienced mountain men thought it would not be possible, however urgent the need. Then a civilian scout named John Phillips, called "Portugee," offered to go. He was a man whose reputation was not of the best, having been quarrelsome and somewhat untrustworthy. But apparently in him there was also unusual heroism, bravery and endurance, and dire emergency brought out these qualities.

The Colonel gave Phillips his own thoroughbred horse to ride. Phillips took a sack of oats for the horse and a few biscuits for himself.

To this day it is a marvel to the West that Phillips found his way to his destination. Ordinarily, both horses and men are inclined to travel in a circle during a blizzard. Phillips rode straight through the swirling darkness, and managed to keep his sense of direction. For the first few miles he was painfully alert for the Sioux, but apparently it had not occurred to them that anyone would be out in such a storm, and he encountered no one. When well away from the fort, he urged his horse into a gallop, and rode hard.

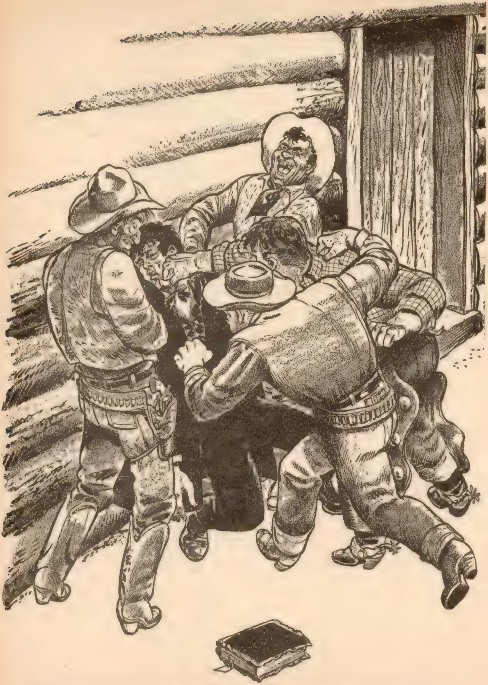
All that night and for two more days and nights he traveled, his hands, feet and face becoming more deeply frostbitten each hour. At Horse Shoe Creek, forty miles from Laramie, there was a telegraph station, and there he telegraphed to Laramie before riding on. For some reason, that telegram was never delivered.

It was the day before Christmas, 1866. Laramie in those days had become fairly civilized. It was out of the Indian fighting area, and was comfortable and safe. The officers and men of the garrison there had their wives with them. There was an officers' club, and the officers were giving a Christmas Eve Ball.

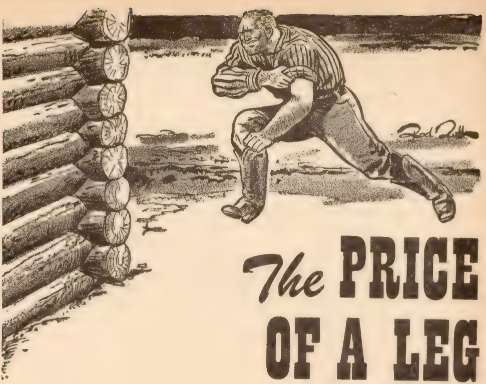
Into the midst of the festivities, the warmth, the dancing, the gaily dressed women, staggered a gaunt, frozen figure. Snow-covered, exhausted, he delivered his message. Then he collapsed. Outside the door, his commander's horse was dying, after an ordeal which was too much for the finest of animals. Phillips himself lay at death's door for many weeks. Two hundred and thirty-six miles they had come, over trackless winter wastes, traveling almost continually for three days and three nights.

Because of the heroic endurance of Portugee Phillips, reinforcements arrived at Fort Kearney in time to protect that important place from the Indians, and to save the lives of the remainder of the suffering garrison.

The Sioux found out who had done this to them, and they did not forgive nor forget Phillips. Six years afterwards they had an opportunity for revenge. They killed all his cattle, ruining him financially. —*by Pete Boggs*



Black snarled, half senseless from the merciless slugging he was receiving from the ruffians



The PRICE OF A LEG

by John Di Silvestro

Black vowed that he'd be a preacher!—if the Lord would spare his leg—and he didn't break his vow!

WHIT BLACK was trapped. He instinctively crouched against the rough logging of the rude cabin on the outskirts of the booming, new Railroad town of Crown Town.

Black snarled, half senseless from the merciless slugging he had received at the hands of the five ruffians who were systematically, gleefully beating him to death.

"Who needs prayin' fer now?" said the cleanly shaven squat one.

They rushed forward with the suddenness of Prairie deviltry. Two of them grasping the arms of the tall, thin bible carrier and holding him for the blurring fists that battered the bloody one time gambler.

"Easy, Jack," Whit Black heard through the burning pain that made any voluntary motion impossible.

"All right, Pete, we leave him iffen you say so," were the last words Black heard before his final sense, that of hearing, left his crawling body.

He wanted to reach them. Tear into them with his teeth. He couldn't lift his body or arms but he could push himself toward the jeering voices.

"By Gawd," said one of them. "He shore got the right stuffings. Lookit 'im comin'!"

Then a well placed kick stopped the bible toter. . . .

There was a coldness about him, a tickling soothing iciness that hissed down his throat and cooled his chest.

"Please open your eyes," begged a feminine voice. "Please . . ."

He tried to open his eyes. He couldn't. He pushed his fingers at his eyes. He couldn't *open* his eyes. He cried out weakly.

Then gentle, cooling fingers were clearing the mucilage-like mask that sealed his eyes.

Whit Black saw a greenish haze with something lumped in the center of it. It gradually took form.

"Where am I, girl?" he asked, his voice a mere whimper.

"Please don't talk. I'm Sue Ella Rhine, daughter of the Minister here. I was riding and saw you lying near the cabin. I brought my father and he helped bring you here. He's getting a doctor."

"I'm all right," Black said, propping himself on his elbows. He was about to throw aside the sheets when he looked down at his water matted, hairy chest. He was naked!

He quickly made a motion toward covering himself and froze as a sudden, shooting pain creased along his spine.

The girl gently eased him into a reclining position and tucked him under the sheets. She said:

"Dad didn't know how badly hurt you were. He removed your clothing to see if you were wounded by some weapons."

Black didn't appreciate the warm tinge of red that rouged her young, attractive face. He was asleep. It was always easy to sleep away a huge, dull ache.

She smiled at the hard face that was boyishly relaxed in sleep. The thin lips opening and closing with painful breathing. The jet black hair dank from her damp cloth.

She visibly shook herself. The handsome stranger wasn't interested in tautbreasted, rounded girls at the moment. She would have more opportune moments to draw attention to herself.

She blushed at her own thoughts.

"SIR," said the pawky medico. "You are a hard headed, tough boned hombre with a lucky streak this wide." The doctor illustrated his point with stubby, almost clean hands.

Sue Ella said quickly: "But he isn't supposed to get from bed yet, is he doctor?"

Doc Mose Livint smiled. "A man's a fool to get outa bed afore he has to I always say."

Minister Ralph Rhine watched this by-play of words with a studious calm. he said:

"Perhaps Mister Black will tell us what caused his beating. That, I believe, is more important to us than having an unexpected guest in the house."

Black grinned, so they didn't know. "I happen to be a bible preacher," he explained. "Didn't you see my bible?"

The Reverend Rhine nodded. "We didn't think it was yours. My apologies, sir, I have a young daughter with me. I didn't want the wrong sort of person in my home."

"I understand," Black said. "But there's plenty I don't savvy yet."

"Good day," said Doctor Livint, "I wish you won't need my services again." He winked at Sue Ella. "A practical woman always makes the best type of practical nurse." He left.

"What did he mean by that?" the Minister asked of his daughter.

"Whiskey soaked old fool," she said.

Black grimaced. "I'd appreciate knowin' what in thunderation goes in this town. I jus' made my usual little speech in the biggest saloon, askin' for someone to come out to a clearing and listen to my talk. I have been laughed at before. But never by a whole crowd."

Minister Rhine was amazed. "You mean you went into the *biggest* saloon and made that statement?"

"Yes."

"Why that's Zach Zane's Three-In-One," Sue Ella said. "No wonder you were beaten."

"Three-In-One?" asked Black.

"Yes," interposed the Minister hastily. "A gaudy name for a gaudy hellhole. Three-In-One implies that his huge building houses a saloon, gaming tables and ladies."

Sue Ella smiled. "Females," she corrected.

"Yes," said the Minister. "But how did they get you in that lonely section of town?"

"Well," Black said. "Five of the men in the saloon said they'd come and listen to what I had to say. When I got there they jumped me. Why?"

"Simple enough," said the Rev. Rhine. "They don't want any decent people here. It would spoil the business of the vice lords who have easy pickings of it. What with all the people coming to our town since it's a railroad town now and cattle can be shipped from this point."

"How come they let you stay?" asked Black.

"I was here when this was just another sleepy Saturday night town. I guess they tolerate me, but attendance has dropped ninety per cent."

Sue Ella said angrily, "That's because our Church was burned to the ground. It's that ugly Zach Zane's work."

"This Zane feller always here?" asked Black.

"No," snapped the girl. "He was with the vermin that came into town with the females and gamblers."

"How about the decent folk?" asked Black. "Won't they help you build a Church?"

"No help," said Minister Rhine. "Workers are in demand all over town. I couldn't pay one quarter of the wages. And I guess most of the people are afraid to make an open donation for fear of the consequences."

"Where's the law?" Black wanted to know.

"He deals black-jack for Zane in the evenings," said Rhine, Sr.

"And he sleeps during the day," the girl said flatly.

Whit smiled ruefully. "Git me my pants and shirt will you, Reverent?"

"But—"

"But nothin'. Sue Ella, my horse, a black buck's hitched in front of the Three-In-One. Bring it here will you?"

"You can't get up now," she gasped. "Please."

"Where will you go?" asked the Minister.

"Start a crusade," Black said, taking his clothes from the Minister.

SUE ELLA left the house. When she returned a fully clothed Whit Black smiled at her. He brushed past her and went directly to the saddle-bags of his mount. He removed two cartridge belts and six-guns from the pouch, and entered the house.

Father and daughter couldn't think of anything to say while he checked and oiled the weapons.

He strapped on the gun-belts.

"You will return for dinner?" the girl asked, her eyes begging him not to go.

"I reckon so," he said. "I ain't got two silver dollars to my name. I guess I have to come back here to eat."

"Be careful," warned Minister Rhine, "Zane is a dangerous person."

"Thet's his worry," Black said, politely doffing his hat to the pale faced girl. He didn't bring along his bible. He hadn't forgotten it. He had some "whippin' in the Temple" to perform. He felt mighty saintly as he stepped into the saloon proper of the Three-In-One. He felt blasted happy as he paused at the green topped tables. Watched the intense men pick up cards, discard, pick up, bet, sweat, curse, drink and pray.

He ordered a glass of beer at the bar and carried the beverage to the table with the largest group about it.

The man with the pile of silver and gold coins before him was referred to as "Zach."

He was a cool headed gambler, winning and losing, always winning more than he lost. Black couldn't sense his "gimmick." He finally concluded that the man was a straight gambler.

The stakes were high, and Black felt the rushing urge to caress a deck of cards. If he had any money with which to gamble he wondered if he would have kept his promise. The one he had made in that little mission house a year ago. The one that meant that he wouldn't gamble again if the good Lord wouldn't make the doc cut off his leg. The infected leg. They hadn't cut off his leg. He even carried a bible now. That was part of the vow he took in that Medina River mission house. He intended to keep it no matter how strong the urge became to feel the friendly ruff of a pack of cards against his palms. Anyway he was stony broke.

Zane won a twenty-four hundred dollar pot on two fours. That broke the spirit of the others. Twenty minutes later Zane was aiding two assistants with the chore of putting coins into a square metal box.

Zach Zane rose. He was of medium height with medium blonde hair and a partial smile played constantly about his face.

Zane made his face into a frowning grin. "The preacher," he said softly, as he saw the lank figure of Black. "Well?"

Squat Jack sided his boss and slender Pete flanked the other side.

Jack said, "You lookin' fer more trouble, mustuh?"

"I don't dodge it, Jackie."

"Then get away frum here."

Zane smiled, waved his boys away. "I heard of you. Don't you know where you are not wanted?"

"Last time I was here," Black said. "All I said was for the 'pokes and gents *who wanted* to hear a preach to come outside. Five of your boys came with me and then jumped me."

Zane said, "You are not quite suitable to the atmosphere. People come here to relax and game."

"I know that, Zane."

"Then what is your pleasure?" Zane said good naturedly. "Whiskey? Dice? Roulette? Poker? Or—?"

"I'm a preacher," Black said. He had hold of an idea now. An idea that if handled properly would give him more satisfaction than breaking up the even features of the gambler.

Zane shrugged. "You sky pilots are beggars, all alike. You want. Want money to continue your plaguing way, plaguing people with more worries than they have."

"Or relieving them," Whit said.

Zane fairly snorted, said, "Well

what do *you* want?"

"The attention of the decent people here."

"Start making an attraction of yourself," Zane said. "I got a mighty high powered poker game waiting for me upstairs."

Black smiled. He said, "I'm jus' a free lance bible toter. I jus' remind folks of God. I—I wonder if you are a *real* gamblin' man?"

ZANE'S interest heightened. "I haven't had a poker game to my liking since Shanghai. The Chinese know the reason and thrill of gambling. But then again the Chinese make the most of the few pleasures of this earth."

Black said, "You don't sound like a man who'd order five bully-pusses to beat-up an unarmed man."

Zane frowned. "I like your battered look, my friend. You are armed now."

"I know."

Black moved his slightly battered lips into a grin. "You're jus' not the apologizin' kind, are you, Mr. Zane?"

Zane chuckled. "Forgive me, you are of the Cloth—in a sense—you see I issued a standing order that anyone who disrupted the mood of my place should be instructed firmly and in such a manner that he would never dare attempt it again." Zane paused. "I'm afraid you sassed or attempted to fight them and your actions enraged them a bit."

"You talk right," Black said.

"Then what is your proposition? You hinted at one."

"Yeh. I ain't got no money but I love and know poker. Played it most all day long when I was a kid.

"I hear that you and the other saloon keepers hereabouts don't want a regular church—it burned down sudden like. And the Minister ain't got the money to have one built."

Zane sniffled. "Get to the point."

"You're the biggest saloon owner. How about all the drink places chipping in a hundred dollars to me."

Zane laughed. "What, to have a Church built?"

"No. For me to play you and the other owners a game of poker."

"It is no fun to play against one's own money," Zane said.

"I know," said Black. "But if you—and there's six of you—cleaned me out I give you my word I'll take Rhine away from here. And you'll have a free hand with things."

"What if you win?"

"The money I win goes toward building a Church."

"Nonsense," said Zane. "I have a free run of things as it stands. Why should I take a chance?"

"Because you're wishin' for a *real* poker game."

Zane pondered the point. "Quite true. You realize of course that I'm an honest player or you never would have broached such a proposition."

"Thet's right, Mr. Zane."

"I'll stake you, you can have a table here."

"No. Thet ain't the deal I gave you."

Zane angered. "Then get the hell away from here."

"I swear I'll rouse the town against you."

"You won't live to regret it, mister—"

"—Mister Whitney Black."

Zane chuckled. "I do believe you are a man of remarkable preceptions. And I admit I can't stand too much of an aroused public."

"Then agree to my deal. The others will come in if you lead the way."

"I've made it a rule," said Mr. Zane, "that I never gamble with my own money against my own. Is that quite clear. If you persist on that point I'll have you kicked out of here."

Black said, "Is thet your only reason for not giving me a chance?"

Zane smiled ruefully. "I'm a gambling fool in certain respects. I would not have reached these heights if I hadn't. But you interest me. Yes, dammit, that's the reason. I don't think you could raise five or seven hundred."

"I don't either," said Black. "But I was a bit of a gambler myself in the past and I kin understand your views. If I get the money I'll be back."

"And I'll be pleased," said Zane. He added, "Your beer is stale, may I have it freshened?"

"Thanks no. So long, Zane."

"Good bye," sighed Zachary Zane.

WHIT walked the short twisting streets of Crown Town, neither hearing or seeing the havoc of sound that was necessary in the erection of buildings. He bumped into many persons. Only the murderous droop to his mouth saving him the insult of a swinging palm or a pistol whipping. His bruised face suddenly relaxed.

He thought of Sue Ella. He hastened to the Minister's home.

"Oh, Whit," cried the girl. She appeared ready to hug him when her father stepped into the kitchen.

"I heard you enter," the meek man said. "Thank God they didn't harm you."

"How much money have you got?" Whit asked.

"Money? Why I have a hundred dollar account in the bank. But it's for food and medicines." The minister added quickly, "God forbid."

"Let me have it. You'll get it back."

The girl nodded to her father.

"But Mr. Black," persisted the old man. "What do you want that sum of money for?"

"To build your Church."

Sue Ella sighed. "It isn't one-fifth the price we need," she said.

"I know. But will you give it to me when I ask?"

"Yes," said Sue Ella. "You'll get it!"

"Thanks." White started for the door.

"May I come along?" called Sue Ella.

"Sure." And they both walked out into the hot air that was very still.

"Where are we going?" asked the girl, linking her arm with his.

He grinned. The softness was appealing. "To the railroad station, to see what the train unloads."

"Oh I've watched the trains come in every day." She laughed, it was a friendly burst of sheer animal energy. "It's my only amusement."

"For a purty girl like you?" teased Black.

"Hush. Boys are leery of Ministers' daughters."

"Not where I come from."

"Where do you come from?"

"Ministers' daughters should know."

She blushed and he squeezed her arm. "You're as cute as a hairless pup," he said. "An' I'm trying to get you to dislike me. Thet explain it?"

"Then you do like me?" she said.

"Uh-huh. But I like apple pie, a fast stream and a good bronc.

"I'm quieted," she said. "Oh gosh, here comes the train. Ain't she pretty?" She realized her slip. "Isn't she pretty?"

He grinned. "As purty as a red-faced girl."

"Oh you." She jabbed him lightly on the arm.

They watched the motley crew exit from the three passenger cars. Whit whistled softly as he spied a well dressed pair. "I'll be," he muttered.

"What?" asked Sue Ella.

"Wait here," he snapped, and walked after the pair. He called:

"Hey Penn, Sisson!"

They turned.

The erect, tall one yelped. "Blast me to hell, if it ain't Whit Black!"

They shook hands.

"Glad ta see you," the smaller one said. "If I thought I'd lay eyes on you here I wouldn't have sat in on that game on the train."

"That fool, pup Penn busted us," Sisson said, pointing to the little man.

Whit's face fell.

"What's the matter?" asked Sisson.

"I was goin' to ask you boys for a little loan."

"Me too," Sisson said glumly.

"You do look seedy," Penn said. "Ain't there no poker devils 'round here?"

"I'm not gambling any more, Penn. I'm a bible toter now. I preach around."

Their mouths gaped.

HE TOLD his old friends the story. About the shooting fracas leaving him with a riddled leg. An infected leg that had to be amputated. He wouldn't consent. He made a vow that if he didn't die he'd preach God's word and not gamble again.

"Wal, I'll be damned," Sisson said.

"I feel the same way," Black said. "Only I am." He told them the situation.

"We got a couple of brand new fifties," Penn said. "But you know they're useless here."

"Why?" asked Black. He knew the value of brand new fifties to the pair.

"Town's not big enough," said Sisson, then glanced shyly at his glistening boot toes. "But I reckon for an old friend we could oblige."

"This train turns and pulls out in an hour," Black said. "You boys could swing it. I'll mail your money back to you."

Sisson grinned. "Send it to Ma Wilson's place in Chicago."

"Good." Whit smiled. "Boys, you'll have my prayers, always."

"Lord," said Penn. "It sorta disgusts me, listenin' to ya talk like thet."

"Penn," admonished Sisson. "He didn't mean it, Whit."

"I guess he didn't," said Black. "Forget it, boys."

"I'm plumb sorry," said Penn. "We will have thet dinero rustled for you in a hour. Stay here, mebbe we'll get done quicker."

"How many places in town?" asked Sisson, glancing at his watch.

"There's 'bout five eating places, seven saloons, not counting the Three-In-One. It's the biggest. Don't try it. The boss there is a smart cuss."

"Thanks for the tip," Sisson said, straightening his shoulders. "Be seein' you, Whit."

"Yeh," echoed little Penn. "We'll shore be seein' you."

Black walked back to the girl. She gave him a curious stare but she didn't ask the obvious question.

They walked back to the house. They stood under an ancient tree, watching the wind sway the lofty branches.

"They're old friends," Whit said.

"I know. I mean I guessed." She took his arm, pushed herself toward him.

He kissed her hard and fast.

"Oh, Whit . . ."

He sighed wearily and sat on the bench surrounding the tree. She sat close to him.

"Tell me, Whit, please. I know you just kissed me for the kissin' . . . But keep me interested. You can, Whit. It's so boring here. You're the first man I ever met that has me blissin'."

"Penn and Sisson are two wonderful crooks," he said, watching for the effects of his words.

She only smiled, drawing a bit closer

to him.

He decided upon making it a well told tale. "Wal, you know how we need money. Right 'bout now Penn and Sisson are eating in some eating place. Not sitting t'gether, mind you, But at opposite tables. And right 'bout now Penn is payin' the cashier. . . .'

"Seven dollars," said the seedy cashier.

"Here." Penn handed her a brand new fifty dollar bill.

She calmly counted out his change. Fifty dollar bills weren't a rarity in Crown Town of late.

"Thank you," said Penn, walking away.

Sisson finished his coffee and joined the line surging past the cashier's stall. The place was doing a roaring business.

She picked up the little slip of paper Sisson handed her. She read from it. "Coffee." She burped. "Fifty cents."

He gave her a dollar. She gave him fifty cents change. He walked away, lighting a cigar.

Five minutes later Sisson pushed his way to the head of the line and said to the cashier: "Ma'am, you gave me the wrong change. I gave you a fifty dollar bill and you gave me change for a dollar."

"I did not," she said. "You had coffee, you gave me a dollar."

"Look, lady, I gave you a fifty; I know what I gave you."

"Then why didn't you ask me then and there for the right change *if I* made a mistake?" she snapped.

"Git movin', mistuh," a burly cowpoke growled. "I want to git outa here."

The rest in the waiting line yelled for service also.

A PUDGY little man with silly motives behind his forced grin came to the stall.

"What's the matter, Polly?" he asked.

She said, "This man says I gave him the wrong change."

Sisson told the manager his story.

"But, sir," fussed the little man. "Polly doesn't make mistakes. You should have checked before leaving the stall."

"Damn' right I should've," snapped Sisson, wheeling and starting for the door. He turned abruptly and came back to the manager. He said:

"I just remembered. The reason I didn't count the change was because I had two fifties—*brand* new fifties from the bank at Redon—and a single. I thought I gave her the single."

"Well?" asked the manager.

"The serial numbers on the two bills should be practically the same, exceptin' the last number, right?"

"Yes," agreed the little man. He motioned to Polly. "Get the fifty dollar bill he says he gave you. It should be a brand new fifty."

Polly took the only brand new bill in the till. The one Penn had given her. She was a little mixed up herself now. She didn't say a word.

Sisson took the other fifty from his pocket, he read: "Serial number 999-878-678."

The little man nervously reached into his pocket and counted out forty nine dollars and fifty cents change for Sisson. "You are right, sir," he said. "The serial number on this bill reads 999-878-677. You did say you got these new fifties at Redon?"

"That's right," said Sisson haughtily. "An' I hope your cashier will be more careful in the future. I got an important business engagement."

"We are terribly sorry," gushed the little man, but Sisson was hurrying through the door.

"An'," concluded Black. "He's workin' the other places right now."

"But," began the girl . . .

"It ain't honest," Black said. "But compared to the inflated prices they're charging it's real mild like."

She smiled. "And you're doing all this for Dad—and Crown Town."

"I ain't doin' nothing right now," he said, rising to his feet. "I got to be at the railroad station to get the money from the boys."

"God bless them," said Sue Ella.

"What else kin He do?" grinned Whit, pausing long enough to take her in his arms.

"You know," he said, as he held her at arms length. "I think you're a mighty fetching girl."

"I ain't fetched nothin' yet," she mocked.

"Jes' keep putting this much effort inta it and ya'll get results *pronto*," he said, leaving her to stare at his retreating back.

"You blamed fool," she murmured, shivering ever so slightly. . . .

BLACK sat on the freight dock gazing at the glint of the railroad track. He wondered what the Reverend Rhine would say if he knew Black was going on *whether* Crown Town would have a Church or no religion whatsoever.

Two gentlemen, sweating profusely, strolled past the distracted Black. He glanced up at them. The shorter one made a little motion with his hand.

Black followed them into the wooded area behind the railroad station.

"Gee-roos-a-loom," wheezed Penn. "It was tough goin', Whit, but we made it. Here." He handed Black a sheaf of bills. "There's a little over three hundred there. We got enough ourselves. Don't worry 'bout us."

"You know," said Sisson. "I think we'll work the small towns from here on in."

"Yeh," said Penn. "It's so easy convincin' 'em."

Sisson glared at the little man. "Next time I do the eatin' and you do the coffee drinkin'."

"Why shore," drawled Penn. "But the train'll be pulling out most any minute now."

Black warmly shook hands in turn with each of them.

"Boys," said Black. "If you ever need a favor try and get word to me."

"Sure as blazes hope not," said Sisson, grinning carelessly, and making a dash for the train which was gathering up steam. Little Penn waddled behind him.

Black smiled and waved to them.

The supper plates were washed and put away and Whit was counting the pile of currency on the table. "With your hundred," he said to the Rhine family, "it makes four hundred and thirty dollars."

"What are you going to do with the money?" asked Minister Rhine.

"Double or triple it, go about and get a collection. When they see the four hundred they'll know we ain't got so hard a pull ahead of us and mebbe loosen up."

"It may succeed," said the Minister. "Good luck, son."

"Thanks." Whit watched the corners of Sue Ella's lips pucker thoughtfully. They both couldn't be thinking of the same thing—he hoped.

Black's first stop that evening was the Gold Penny Saloon. Jock Burnt was an ex-prize fighter, ex-convict, and ex-foot-pad. He was a very reliable person.

"Jock," Whit greeted. "How are you?"

Jock guffawed. "You sure smooth talked Zane, preacher. What you want with me? Not that I'm listenin'."

"I come here to give you an invite to a sweet poker game. All the saloon owners will be there. It'll be held in Zane's place."

Jock looked surprised. "You mean you dug up enough to sit in on a game?"

"Yep. You be there?"

"Wouldn't miss it fer Lillian Schwartz. An' Lillian Schwartz is the one gal in my place who wouldn't spit on the best part of me."

Black grinned. "Mebbe your good will will help you."

Jock said a lewd word. "Could be," he amended. "Could be. Say: When this game bein' held?"

"You'll get word. Mebbe tonight. Mebbe tomorrow night."

Black visited the other five saloons and was treated in good fashion; all of them anxious for the "show-down."

Whit walked into the Three-In-One. He was informed that Zane was in his office up-stairs.

"Black," said Zane. "I had a hunch I'd be seeing you again."

"I'm set for the game," Black said. "The other saloon keepers are set too. You backin' out?"

"Hell no. I was hoping you'd get up the money. Tonight?"

"Err—no—how 'bout tomorrow night. I want to scrape up as much as possible."

"Fine." Zane's eyes gleamed. "Then till tomorrow night."

They shook hands in a friendly fashion.

WHIT walked down the stairs and waited for a space to appear before the bartender who was nearest to the cash register. He bellied up to the bar.

"Yeh?" said the bartender.

"How'd you like to make fifty dollars?"

"Iffen I robbed Zane he'd cut my throat. I don't make fifty in three weeks here."

"Then you want to make fifty dollars?"

"Sure."

"Then meet me by the railroad station at midnight, eh?"

"Why midnight?" He seemed spooked of a sudden.

"Then what time can you get away?"

"I kin get away in fifteen minutes."

"I'll be there," said Black.

The bartender was good as his word. Whit said:

"All you have to do is this: Tomorrow night when Zane asks for a deck of cards, you give him this pack."

"Holy—"

"Now don't get scairt, they're expensive cards but nobody'll know they're bad ones. You just give his this deck." Whit took two sealed decks from his pocket, handed them to him. "The extra's in case he wants a fresh deck to change his luck."

The bartender laughed. "They look the same as the ones we al'ays use."

"I know," grinned Black. "And here's your fifty."

"The winnings goin' toward buildin' the Church?" the bartender asked.

"Do you care?"

"Nope. Hope you take his pants. The uppity son."

"It'll go toward buildin' the Church."

The bartender went away happy.

"Ready, gentlemen?" inquired Zach Zane.

They all nodded. It was going to be one hell of an eight-man poker battle.

Zane waved to the bar and the flat faced bartender nearest the till handed two packs of cards to someone lounging near the bar. That person brought the cards to Zane who broke the seal on one packet and threw them on the table.

"High card deals," he said, and started flicking cards to the players.

Joe Pie started the game. He had king high.

The game went along innocently for one half hour. Black, winning one hand, losing two and so forth.

Then Zane broke the seal of the second deck and Whit began to get nervous. Even knowing what the other fellow has for a hand doesn't matter when your luck's so bad you can't top him. And he couldn't afford to bluff. He had one hundred and seventy-five dollars left.

Black looked at three fours, he drew two cards. He picked up another four.

Zane had three kings. That was the second highest hand in the game.

"Raise one hundred," Black said, dropping all of his chips into the pot.

"One hundred and one hundred more," Zane said, smiling.

Black took a ring from an inner pocket. It was a red stone in a golden setting. Black said:

"Raise you; what's that worth."

Zane examined it. "It's worth twelve hundred. You raising eleven hundred?"

"Yeh."

"I call," said Zane, adding another five hundred to the pot, grinning at the black garbed preacher.

He showed his four fours. They were damned good. He raked in the two thousand dollar pot—not counting his "bartar ring."

He made two more killings. One a fifteen hundred dollar pot and another of thirty-four hundred.

THEN Zane signaled to the bar for another fresh pack of cards. And for the first time in his life, man or boy, Whit Black quickly took stock of his chips. *He counted them.* No gambler ever did that. He had sixty-nine hundred dollars worth of chips before him.

"I'm pullin' out boys," he said.

"What!" It was Zane.

"We didn't say nothin' 'bout this bein' a blood game," said Black. "An' I'm pullin' out 'cause I won what I wanted to win, enough for Minister Rhine to build his Church."

"Let him go," laughed Jock Burnt. "With his luck we're better off with him out of play."

Zane grumbled but was forced to attend his hand as Jock raised two hundred on first bid.

Black moved quickly through the darkness to the Rhine house. The door swung open before he could knock.

"We were waiting for you," Sue Ella said excitedly. "What happened?"

He went to the table and dropped the money in the center of the table cloth. "Sixty nine hundred there," he said. Then he removed some bills. "Sixty-seven now. I need some runnin' expenses."

"You mean you *collected* that much from the riff-raff of Crown Town?" cried Minister Rhine.

"In a way. There was a big poker game in progress at the Three-In-One and they were willing to give some money to a good cause."

"Who?" shrieked the elated Minister. "I must go thank them."

"Strangers. No need for that. They'd be embarrassed."

"I guess so, Whit."

Black moved into his room and emerged carrying his roll.

"Wh-where you going?" Sue Ella gasped.

Minister Rhine kept a golden silence. If Sue Ella couldn't keep him in Crown Town he most certainly couldn't—ever.

"Jus' movin' on," Whit said. He quickly said good-bye to them and hastened out.

The girl followed him. She grabbed

his arm, clutching tighter with ever tearful breath.

"Did you—did you rob anyone?" she sobbed.

"No." He told her of the rigged decks.

"Bu—but you're a preacher. You told me—when you were sick—that you promised you'd never gamble again . . ."

"Thet's right. An' I didn't *gamble*. When thet square deck was put in the game I upped an' left. Ask anybody. I'm not one to go back on my word."

"Whit." Her voice softened to a whisper. "Darling?"

"I'll miss you, honey, but marriage ain't for me. Iffen I stayed I'd pet around you, and mebbe have to marry you. I don't want that. I'm a mighty weak man. Thet should be compliment enough fer you."

"I don't want compliments, Whit. I want you."

"How old are you, Sue?"

"Nineteen."

"Wal, I'm too much older'n you. Now get inside, thet wind's gettin' mighty cool."

"I guess I've made a fool of myself," she said.

"No. You didn't." He wanted to take her in his arms. He touched her shoulders with his fingertips and kissed her gently on the brow. "Good-bye, Sue Ella."

"You'll come back again—you'll come and visit—won't you, Whit?" She was crying in earnest now.

"Yes," he lied. "I will. 'Bye Sue." He mounted and kneed the horse away from the strongest temptation a man could encounter.

Two miles away he stopped to rest the winded horse. He gazed at the cold, glinting stars meshing the Texas sky. "An' some people make wishes on them cold sparkling things," he spat out. He rushed the animal forward.

Four miles later he was in a slightly better mood. He said to the sky: "Blasted if I could stand a preacher in the family."

Damned if he still didn't feel lousy. . . .

THE END

THE ORIGIN OF THE PEACE-PIPE

THIS interesting Sioux legend tells of the origin of the Peace Pipe, so important to the Indian ceremonies and customs. Many, many years ago, two handsome braves were sent by their chief to find a buffalo herd. As they rode along, they saw approaching them a figure, walking. As they came nearer, they saw that it was a beautiful woman. She carried a bundle of sage brush sticks.

One of the Indians decided to claim the woman for his own, and rushed toward her. There came a crash of thunder, a whirlwind, and a mist which enveloped the brave and the woman. The mist cleared away, and the second Indian perceived, fearfully, that the woman stood alone, still holding her bundle of sticks. At her feet were a pile of bones, all that remained of his bold companion.

The woman turned to the second Indian. Softly, she told him to go home to his tribe, and tell them that she was on her way to them. They were to place their tepees in a circle, with an opening to the north. Opposite the opening, facing the north, was to be erected a large tepee.

Trembling, the brave returned to his tribe with the message. Preparations were made as directed. The beautiful woman arrived and went to the large tepee, where she addressed the people. From her bundle of sticks she drew a small, beautifully carved and decorated pipe. This was the original Peace Pipe.

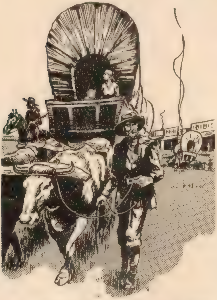
She gave the tribe a code of morals to follow, and gave them also forms of prayer, and many ceremonies which included the use of the Pipe. For instance, if they were hungry, there was a ceremony in which they held up the Pipe, which was supposed to attract game to the place.

Silently, in wonder and awe, the Indians watched and listened as the woman explained the uses of the Pipe which she had given them. Then she lay upon the ground, and arose as a black buffalo cow. She lay down again, and arose as a beautiful red buffalo. The third time she lay down she became a snow white buffalo cow. This beautiful animal turned and walked slowly away; and the people watched until it vanished over a distant hill top.—*By June Lurie.*

MIGRATION'S START

By WALTER CLARK

Independence, Missouri, was the springboard to the West—the jumping-off place to a bright new future!



A CENTURY ago Independence, Missouri, was the teeming, hectic starting point for the long trails to the West. In the 1820's, the Santa Fe Trail was being increasingly used for carrying supplies to the Southwest, and Independence was the logical spot where cargo could be transferred from river boats to wagon trains. The town grew around the business of supplying necessities to the Santa Fe trade. The mule markets were famous, and there were shops for building and repairing wagons, a bank, equipment for handling the transfer of freight, and the inevitable saloons and gambling halls which were a part of all the young towns of the day.

In the thirties began the urge to Oregon, and the first intrepid pioneers braved the long and dangerous route which came to be called the Oregon Trail. It was natural for them to go to Independence, where outfitting a wagon train was familiar business, and start their journey into the unknown from there. Each year the number increased, as more and more men, women and children set out for Oregon.

Then came the news of gold in California, and Independence became a place of vast excitement, rushing confusion, and purposeful bustle as emigrants by the hundred prepared to go into the West. Especially in the springtime, when most of the migrations began, the hubbub was terrific, as the place became a maelstrom into which swept masses of sweating, shouting humanity, and tons of food and equipment, all of which emerged in due time as more or less organized trains of wagons bound for California, Oregon or Santa Fe.

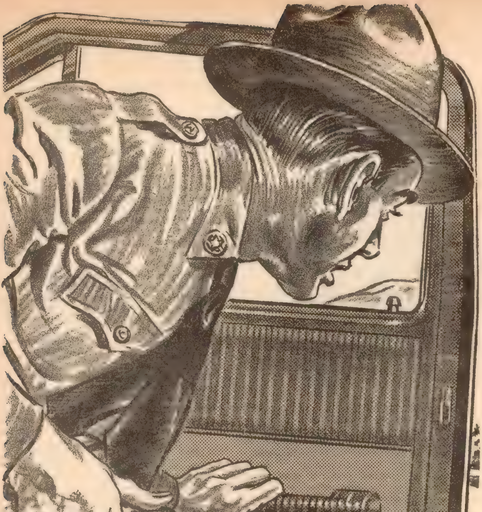
The city was actually several miles from the river. The bales of freight, the hundreds of animals and the passengers came up the Missouri River to Independence Landing, and toiled from there to the city of Independence. The river itself was full of dangers, from shifting sand bars and drifting tree trunks, and from the fact that as the travel increased, any flimsy old boat was drafted into service, and apt to be seriously overloaded. Boiler explosions were all too frequent. One of the worst of these occurred in 1852, when the steamer "Saluda" explodel, and two hundred people were killed. But no disaster which happened to another could still the hopeful urge which each man felt within himself, and the migration continued.

Upon arrival at Independence, the emigrants prepared as hurriedly as possible for the next stage of their journey, the long wagon trek westward. The more foresighted brought their own tested animals and equipment with them from their former homes. Many, however, acquired these possessions from the shops and mule markets of the town, where were often calmly sold to the unsuspecting novice mules so wild as to be highly dangerous, and other goods of inferior quality.

Next to the menace created by unbroken animals was the excitement caused by the general presence of deadly weapons. It was considered essential that all the men be heavily armed as a protection against Indians and wild beasts on the trail, but those unaccustomed to the use of guns caused untold carnage and mutilation, inadvertently or otherwise.

Once equipped for the journey, the proper time to start was of vital importance. Feed for the animals was the prime factor involved, especially as traffic on the trail increased heavily. They must not start so early in the spring that the grass had not yet sprouted, unless they carried a supply of grain. Those driving oxen had to wait even longer, as their animals could not eat very short grass. Yet when they got into the desert country, the late comers were apt to find the forage practically gone.

Inevitably, the preparations were completed, the decisions were made, and each springtime the turbulent human river flowed out of Independence, moved westward by an urge that was irresistible.



I opens the door and the kid is ready to slug me

WE GOTTA BE DIGNIFIED, MAC

by Alexander Blade

BOUNDARY
LINE
UNITED STATES
OF
AMERICA

SO YOU think you've had troubles, Mac?

You've got a good post-war job, haven't you? So have I. In the Immigration Service down on the Mexican border. You're not living with your in-laws anymore after a year or two out of the Army, are you? Neither am I. My apartment is no foxhole. Maybe you're hollering about your boss being a heel? He knows you're an ex-serviceman and treats you white, doesn't he? So does Inspector Karns. So maybe you're mad at the weather, Mac. So maybe I got it on you a little there, but . . . okay, go ahead and grumble anyhow.

You got a lot of everything you dreamed about while you were down in the Pacific or over in Europe or up in Greenland, didn't you?

All right, go ahead and squawk. You at least don't have to be dignified. We immigration officers do, Mac. That's where the trouble started.

I like the Immigration Service. Good job. Good pay. Interesting work. It's what I dreamed about down in the South Pacific. So when I get back I apply for training. They take my pedigree and check it to see if I am a clean cut young man who never hit his old lady over the head with a beer bottle. They investigate to find out if I am honest, loyal, of good character, a citizen, and never got skizzled and arrested for wrapping a telephone pole around my car radiator.

I am all of the above. I have no bad habits except playing poker and listening to radio comedians. So they send me to El Paso for six weeks of training, hand me a pair of green pants with black stripes down the legs and a flat brimmed hat, and tell me to go out and also buy my own gun. I am now on probation as an Immigration Officer and will go over to Douglas, Arizona, which is a half mile north of Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico.

That's where my troubles begin, Mac.

Not at first, you understand. We work in the station checking cars and the *passportes* which allow the Mexicans to come over for twenty-four hours to shop and visit, but not to work. We make the rounds of the smelter and mines and look over the Mexicans for wetbacks. A wetback, Mac, is a Mexican who slips across the border—supposedly by swimming a river—and goes to work on the American side, hoping we'll think he was born over here in the States. We check all incoming and outgoing freight trains and pull them off. We go to the railroad section gangs and ask them what is their social security number and have they any identification. If it's a first or second offense, we load them in the car and drive them back to the line as VR's.

A VR is a Volunteer Returnee, said Returnee Volunteering because we got him by one arm.

We have to tell them that it's against the law for aliens to enter the United States illegally and they mustn't do it again or we'll have to file charges against them before the U.S. Commissioner.

That's what we do with the new ones, Mac. They're mostly pretty good guys; just over the line working for much bigger wages.

Of course you understand that some, remembering how nice we gotta treat them, slip right back again and again and go on another job. So we have to put them in the *juzgado* until they eat up in board and room all the wages they had coming on the job where we found them.

After which we take them back again, broke this time, and give off with another *naughty-naughty boy* lecture about what's gonna happen when they do it just *once* more.

Interesting work, Mac. I like it until that Saturday morning we get this call from Eagle Eye Annie. Eagle Eye Annie is a steel tower one hundred and fifty feet high down on the line east of both towns. Two of the boys keep watch up there with high-powered field glasses.

"Tower to car Forty-One," comes over the radio. "Alien has crossed under the fence and running toward First and E Streets. Boy about ten years old. Wearing shirt and pants, is barefooted. Carrying an object under one arm."

ED SAMPSON is driving. He tells the boys okay and steps on the gas and we do a Barney Oldfield down Main Street.

Something like a big sigh comes out him. "Porfie's probably back again," he says sadly. "Now we're in for it. I knew I shoulda stuck to punching cows."

"Who," I ask, "is Porfie?" We are scooting across the front end of a truck making a turn and the driver is sticking his head out the cab window to yell, "Hayseed!" at the back end of Forty-One.

"Porfie," he says, "is the biggest headache the Immigration Service ever had. We found some relatives of his a couple of months ago down in Cannanea and sent him down there to give the boys a rest, but it looks like he's hopped an ore train and come back again."

Between Douglas and Agua Prieta is about a half mile of flat, desert sand covered with big tumbleweeds and greasewood. We catch sight of Porfie. He's streaking across it like a cottontail with a bulldog after him. Over one shoulder is a *bola* kit for shining shoes. A Mexican kid's not a Mexican kid, Mac, unless he's got himself a *bola* kit.

Porfie sees us and puts on more speed.

"You might as well get initiated now." Ed says, grinning expectantly at me. A free show, huh?

We can't go out into the sand in a car unless you got a bulldozer along, so I hop out of Forty-One with Ed hollering, "Rah-rah-rah! Ziz boom bah! Education, Education. Three cheers for the Immigration!" He knows I went to college.

Funny, huh? He don't know that I was a track runner.

I take out after Porfie. As I said, Mac, I am a pretty good track man that first year in college before I get the notice that culminates in a Second Lieutenant's bars in an Infantry combat outfit. I hold my gun down on my hip with one hand and begin to unlimber. I haven't gone fifty yards before I get to thinking that Porfie has the makings of a pretty good track man, too.

Dodge, Mac? It's like a hound trying to get hold of a twisting jackrabbit. We go around bushes and I go over them. I reach one place and he's in another. Over in the car come sounds like somebody is laughing his fool head off. I am beginning to puff a little and sweat some more, but I finally get Porfie. He dives between my legs and under a backyard fence. I go over the top of him and then the fence. I played football in college too, Mac. I bring him down with a flying tackle that takes about a yard of hide off the palm of one hand.

I get him. He gets me too—with the teeth on one leg. I let out a yell and haul him up by one ear, I am that mad. Those whoops coming from over in the car don't help matters any either.

You see, we gotta be dignified, Mac. The rule books don't say anything about what an officer on probation is supposed to do when an alien bites him. They don't say anything about lulus like the one who opens that back door either.

I am burning.

She is about twenty-two or three, I think, while I hold Porfie with one hand and the place where he bit me on the leg with the other. She's got blonde hair and the kind of a shape you used to pin up in the lid of your barracks locker box. She also wears a pair of nose glasses with a black ribbon.

"May I ask," she inquires acidly, "just what you think you're doing with that boy in my back yard?"

I can think of a very funny crack to make about what I'd like to do with that boy in her back yard, but the rule books won't allow even a little. I let go the bite and straighten.

"I am," I begin with calm dignity, or at least as much as I can scrape up under the circumstances, "an Immigration Officer and I—"

"I'm quite aware of that," she cuts in like a knife through soft oleomargarine, "and I'm also aware that you are, against regulations, handling him in a manner quite unnecessarily rough. Turn him loose at once. Porfie, come here."

"Porfie will stay right here," I say firmly. Dames and aliens, you gotta treat them alike. Firm, Mac.

I TRANSFER my grip to his arm and she comes down the steps. Her voice isn't the only place where there's ice. It's in the eyes back of the nose glasses. I am not too mad to notice they're a kind of clear blue. She comes over to Porfie, who's standing there grinning and not panting. I am not grinning either, but I am certainly panting a little. The place where he bit me still hurts.

So she thinks I'm a brute, Mac? The rule books again. They won't let me pull up my pants leg and show her a big blue hickey garnished around the edges with teeth marks.

We gotta be dignified, Mac.

She takes Porfie's head in her hand and pulls him protectingly over against that shape covered up by a white house dress—and damned it she don't start talking to him in fluent Spanish!

"You bad boy," she scolds. "I told you not to come back again until I can get your passport. But I knew you would," she adds.

"I don't want a passport, mamacita," Porfie says, grinning up at her and then at me. "It's more fun to be chased by these big soft heads."

He used the word *palomo,* Mac. And I know my Spanish. You learn it after years along the border, four of it in high school, plus another of advanced study in college. *Palomo* means a soft hearted guy who lets everybody impose on him.

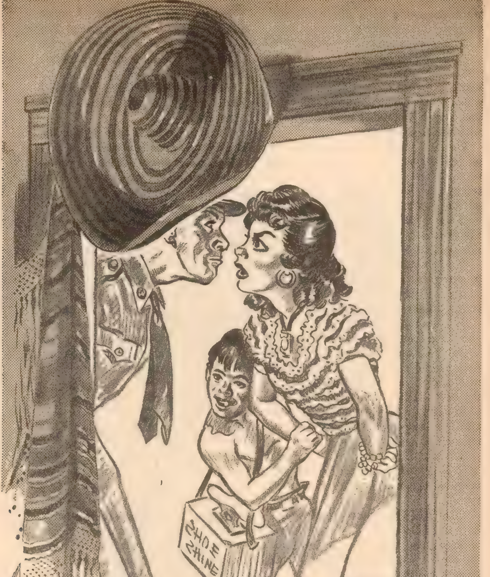
Palomo, he says!

And Mexicans don't use that word. It's from the early *Californios*. I begin to get suspicious. So she tells him he hadn't ought to of come back, huh? He's been there before.

"If I'm not getting personal," I say between pants, "would you mind telling me who you are lady, and what's your connections with this alien?"

"You are getting personal," she comes back in tones like cubes from a refrigerator. "You're not only personal but offensive."

Offensive, she says! My leg is still hurting where he tried to take a chunk out of it with his teeth and my hand with the gravel in it don't feel so good either. The hell with the rule books. I just don't like this lulu in spite of her shape, I don't like the glasses with their black ribbon, and I am positively not feeling any big brotherly affection to-



"You're not only personal, but offensive," she says to me ward the cause of it all, who's still standing there grinning like a pet monkey. The sweat around my collar starts turning into steam.

"So I'm personal and offensive, she says," I holler indignantly. "Lady, I wouldn't get personal or offensive with you, even if you didn't wear the glasses with the black string."

That one, Mac, really puts me back on top again. Nothing makes a lulu so mad, not even a rough pass, as to refer to her glasses. She yanks them off and I see I wasn't mistaken; the eyes are a clear blue, all right. They also are colder than a polar bear's backside on an ice floe.

"For your information, I don't have to wear glasses. I do so because of my students in high school. Some of the seniors are er—quite grown up."

So it's a school teacher she is, huh? So she's got to wear pince-nez glasses on account of her looks and shape, eh? And maybe she's been doing a little extra activity in Spanish with Porfie on the side. Hoh! I am still steaming.

"And you've been teaching this alien a little 'correct' Spanish, eh?" I cut in, remembering what he called me.

Palomo. Hah!

"I have," she says coolly. "I have taken a personal interest in Porfie's welfare."

"Yes, and I've taken a professional interest in Porfie's welfare, too," I snap back, wishing I could bend down and rub my leg where the hickey is. "He's going right back across the line with his bola kit, and if I catch him over here again he'll go before the U.S. Commissioner on charges of illegal entry."

"That I already know. It would look good on your record, wouldn't it? Imprisoning a mere baby."

"It'll look bad on your record for aiding and abetting an alien," I come back at her.

THE nose goes up a trifle. I notice its contour is mildly shaped like the one I got after a football practice scrimmage. But mine ain't mild, Mac. I got it busted.

And from the look she gave me I almost thought I was gonna get it busted again.

"I wish you'd try it," she says coolly. "Mr. Karns, your superior, is a very good friend of mine. When you make your report to him, just say it was Miss Pelroy."

So her name is Miss Pelroy? I wouldn't have asked her first name for all the beef in Mexico, but a Federal officer has to be thorough. Little Porfie mildly redeems himself by calling her Maria. So her name is Mary Pelroy? So I'm not personally interested, just professional. It's a part of our training.

She stands there and pats his head and looks at me like a shark eyeing an oyster. "Mr. Karns knows of the personal interest that I have in Porfie. He's an orphan."

I am too mad at this lulu to let that one pass, and damn the rule books. "He oughta be," I say nastily. "He's about sixty years old and a grandfather."

"I was referring to Porfie, not Mr. Karns. But Porfie has nobody to look after him. He slept in a barn over there on old gunnysacks until they sent him to relatives in Cannanea, who don't want him. He eats whatever he can manage to buy from what pitifully little money he makes shining shoes. And now you're taking him back across the border without giving the p-poor little thing even a chance to eat a good breakfast, you b-big brute."

The rule books again, Mac. They don't say anything about this. But I'm a sucker for a crying lulu. I see those blue eyes begin to get misty, Porfie standing there grinning like a hungry polecat in a chicken coop, and hear

Ed's haw-haws out in the car. So he thinks it's funny, huh?

Okay. He can sit out there and wait. Porfie can have his breakfast.

You understand, Mac, that it's not because I'm tender hearted. And it's not on account of this lulu with the blue mist above that upturned nose and a lot of shape down the other direction. That's got nothing to do with it. But this Ed guy has set out there and let me do the dirty work. His leg hasn't been chewed on, his hand isn't skinned, and he hasn't got bawled out by a block of ice who thinks he's a heel.

I am just good and mad, that's all.

We go inside. They walk together. I limp along behind. We gotta be dignified, Mac.

The kitchen is all white and as neat as you'd expect of a school teacher on Saturday morning. There is a pot of coffee on the stove, and it smells good. She has plates set for two.

My six weeks of training has covered detective work too, and I don't have to figure any further. She was expecting him.

"Will you sit down, Mr. —"

"Black," I say. "Jess Black—and let's not have any minstrel show cracks about it either."

I am still pretty mad about the whole business. I think of what might happen if another call comes in from Eagle Eye Annie. I hope she's as good a friend of the big fellow as she pretends.

"Very appropriately named," she answers, and I see her lips twist up in a half smile. So now she's laughing at me, Mac! "Have a chair, Mr. Black, while Porfie has his breakfast. He won't be long. He's so hungry all the time that I can't make him eat slowly. Would you care for a cup of coffee?"

I don't want the coffee because she's made it, but I think of that smart guy Ed out there in the car and tell her I'll have a cup. Porfie has gone off into the bathroom and is splashing his face in the washbasin.

"He loves the bathroom," she explains, setting my cup on the stove and pouring. "He'll spend hours in it. He thinks it's the seventh wonder of the world."

More detective deduction. I could throw the book at this lulu and it wouldn't be the one that's been worrying me for the past few minutes. Aiding, abetting, harboring an alien. Insulting a Federal officer. . . . I take the coffee with my good hand, keeping the other one down. Next she'll be wanting to introduce me to the bathroom and a medicine cabinet.

I SIP the coffee and feel as foolish as a jackrabbit that comes home to find a skunk in its bedroom, and pretty soon Porfie comes back. His face is scrubbed clean and his damp black hair is combed.

Those, I think, are the dangerous kind; they're intelligent. You got to watch 'em.

I drink coffee and watch while he puts away three eggs, two slices of toast soaked with butter, a slug of strawberry jam, and enough milk to fill up a young milk pen calf. I figure his shine business must have been pretty bad the day before.

She's invited me to eat with them but a Federal officer is too cagey to be bribed. I'm not falling for any of that feminine wiles stuff, Mac. She'll have to be more subtle than that. I only took the two cups of coffee to be polite. Anyhow, I'd already had breakfast.

"You're new here, aren't you, Mr. Black?" she finally says, to make conversation.

"No, I've been here a month," I say, also to make conversation. We gotta be polite too in the Immigration Service. Federal regulations.

"This is my second year here. I usually attend summer classes at the University of Mexico in Mexico City. I hope that someday I can send Porfie there. He's really a very brilliant boy. I've seriously considered inquiring as to the possibilities of adoption."

Adopting him, she says, Mac! So now she's the mother type, only she hasn't got a husband, huh? I put down the empty cup and got up. Next thing she'll be looking for a man with a good paying job and solid future like we have in the Immigration Service.

I change the subject very abruptly. We Federal officers have to be cagey, I told you, Mac. I switch to Porfie, who's wiping his lips with a napkin.

"We better get going," I tell him in Spanish. "By the way, what is your name?"

"Porfirio Jesus Hernandez y Gozalez y Muñeta," he says promptly. "But my name is Porfie."

He pronounces it Porfee. He leaves the chair, swings the bola kit to a shoulder, strides over and kisses her goodbye. "I'll be back in the morning for breakfast while these soft heads are asleep, mamacita," he announces. "But I wish this palomo hadn't caught me until I get up to town. It's a longer ride back in their new car."

Mary—I mean that lulu, Mac, she looks at me and busts out laughing. If I hadn't been so mad I'd have noticed then how white and even her teeth are. But I am boiling again and it's not on account of the two cups of hot coffee, either. Nerve, he's got; slugs of it. My badge and gun don't faze him at all.

I am so mad at the way she's laughing that I think it's about time I put this Spanish teaching lulu back in her place. University of Mexico, huh?

"It's not palomo," I snap at him. "She has been teaching you very old words not used any more."

He shifts the bola kit and looks up at me, his legs braced apart. "Very well then, Señor Immigracion, what is more correct?"

I told you he's intelligent, Mac. The kind you got to watch. And he *would* have to ask something like that. It just happens, Mac, that there's not a handy Spanish word lying around that means a soft hearted man who lets people impose on him.

"Well," I begin, feeling my face get red, "I—well, you see I don't know exactly. . . ."

She is shrieking all the harder when I limpingly haul him out the back door by the arm. "Goodbye, Mr. Black," she calls. "Take good care of him. And remember, Porfie, you must not come back again until I get your passport."

"I don't want a passport," he yells back over his shoulder. "I like to ride in the Señor Palomo's big new car."

MAC, I am burning like a wiener over a campfire. My ears are redder than a pair of fireman's underdrawers hanging out on the washline. We go back across the sand where Ed is lounging behind the wheel smoking a cigarette against regulations. I put Porfie and his bola kit in the back seat and get in front.

"You look," Ed grins, straightening and starting the motor. "like a tomcat that's just been shot in the stomach with a bootjack."

"Iz zat so?"

"Nice bundle of flesh."

"I didn't notice," I say, coldly.

"Oh, now didn't you? What did you think of that coffee?"

"Go to hell!" I snarl at him. My leg is still hurting.

We chauffer Porfie and his bola kit down to the Customs and Immigration Station and get out. I try not to limp as we go under the arch. Four more of the boys are checking passports and it hasn't dulled their eyes.

"All right, you," I tell Porfie in Spanish. "I shall not put you in jail this time. But if I catch you across that line again without a passport I'll not only put you in an American jail but I'll paddle your pants to boot."

"All right," he says; and then in English. "Shine, Meester? You wanta good shine for a dime? Wan dime and I geev you good shine."

Ed is already inside so I give him the quarter and tell him to beat it. I go into the chief's office.

"Porfie again, eh?" he asks.

I nod glumly. Ed keeps looking at me and grinning. "He was down at Mary's house," he explains to the boss. "Jess and her are good friends now."

"Why, that's fine, Jess," Karns says. "Wonderful woman. Make some man like you a fine wife, unless Ed's given up trying."

I look at Ed and scowl. I am getting mad again. So he's been holding out on me?

"I hope he gets her," I grunt.

"So do I?" Ed answers. " You just go right on being mad at her, Jessie. I love it."

I ignore him and turn to the chief. "What are we going to do about this Porfie? How about a passport for him?"

He picks up a card off his desk. It's complete except for the picture; a passport. "Miss Pelroy has already taken care of that. She came over a few days ago when she found he was back from Cannanea and had some pictures taken of him. As soon as we get them from the photographer we'll give him his passport. Then this part of the United States Immigration Service can have a little peace."

"All right," I say. "But if I catch

(BACK COVER)

THE AMERICAN INDIAN—THE IROQUOIS

By WALTER HASKELL HINTON

AS HAS been pointed out on the back cover, the Iroquois was not a tribe but rather a loose group of a union of six separate tribes, the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, Senecas, and Tuscaroras. If the legendary history of the tribe is to be believed, Hiawatha, a Mohawk, and Dekanawida, a Huron, organized this league of tribes all living in Central New York, for the purpose of mutual protection and power for all. In its way, because each tribe sent representatives to a common meeting place, this was democracy in action. Oddly enough, this union of Indians was formed about 1550, shortly before the white man associated with it. After a time, the Indians acquired guns from the Dutch, and with their aid, subdued numerous tribes to the South and West. The Illinois were broken up by the Iroquois as were the Delawares. Usually, in the process the broken-up enemies were adopted into the Iroquois union where they became members of the component tribes. By this process, the Iroquois, by the time of the French and Indian Wars, had built themselves into a force to be reckoned with. Both the French and English tried for their support, with the English finally obtaining it.

THIS was a lucky thing for us. In the long drawn-out struggle that constituted the French and Indian War, most certainly, the English colonists, our forefathers would have been driven from the land, if the Iroquois hadn't sided with them. The fighting was intense and bitter, and but for the help of the Six Nations as the Iroquois liked to call themselves, the English would have lost. But the French tactics of treating the Indians even more shamefully then we, brought them over to our side. Anyone who has read James Fenimore's "Leatherstocking Tales" will recall the cruelty of the French. In any event, the Iroquois effectively blocked French aspirations to the New England territories.

FROM the history of the Six Nations, it might be thought that they were immense in numbers. This is not the case at all. It is believed that at no one time were there more than 16,000 tribesmen.

WHAT remains of this proud and glorious confederation still lives for the most part in Canada, where it was driven by the Americans during the Revolution. Here in the shades of their past greatness, they still enact a ceremony imitating that which was a strong part of their forefathers! It may be only a ceremony but it is reminiscent of the day of the tomahawk!

him back across that line—"

The chief has a receiver in his office to catch tower calls. Eagle Eye Annie's voice breaks in.

"Tower to car Forty-One. Tower calling Forty-One. Alien has just slipped through the fence back of the Customs House. Boy about ten years old. Wearing shirt and pants and barefooted. Carrying an object—"

"Here we go again," grins Ed. "Come along, dearie. I like to watch you run. You have such wonderful form."

We put Porfie back three times that day. By the time I go off shift I am a very tired man. I leave my gun in the station and at four o'clock go across the line to have a Mexican beer. Ed has offered to come with me but this is one time I want to be alone.

So I'm a brute, am I, Mac? So I'd imprison a mere b-baby, would I? Don't she know that Federal officers. . . . I drink the rest of the beer and go on down the street. It doesn't take long to find out where Porfie lives, he's that well known. Everybody knows a kid like Porfie. His home is an adobe hut out behind an abandoned house. I shop around and finally find a family who're pretty poor, but they can find an extra bed. The ten bucks I pay is fifty big pesos to the father. Yes, señor. Si, Señor. For the next month Porfie will have a bed and a share of their poor food. No, Señor, he will not tell anybody, by the Blessed Virgin.

"You better not," I mutter under my breath and take off down a side street. Ed and some of the others on the day shift might be over having a beer too.

YOU understand, Mac, that I'm just investing that dough to save myself a lot of trouble. I figure it this way. If this Mexican firecracker has some regular meals and a place to stay, then he won't be sneaking across the line to the house of this lulu with the mother instincts. I won't have to be chasing him and maybe getting bit again until Ed and I are switched over to the tower or the station. That means I don't run into this block of ice who thinks she knows all about good Spanish.

Pure and simple arithmetic, Mac. Good logical thinking. It's a part of our training. But even though I'm off duty the next morning, a Federal officer is still an officer at all times. So about eight o'clock I head off down toward E and First Streets again, kind of keeping to the side streets because Ed is prowling with another of the boys and might not understand. He wouldn't believe me if I tell him it's about Porfie, I think.

There's no car in sight so I straighten my tie and go right up to the front door. So she thinks she'll put one over on the Immigration boys, does she? Maybe he slipped over before daylight. I knock on the front door and wait. If Porfie is there, this lulu is going to get told off plenty for not calling the officers.

I am very determined on that point, Mac.

She comes to the front door and looks a little surprised. I expect to see those blue eyes start turning into ice cubes again.

"Why, good morning, Mr. Black," she says pleasantly. "What can I do for you?"

"I—uh—am down here to see about that alien," I explain. "He said he would be back, and of course you understand—"

She opens the door wider and begins to laugh. "Yes, he's here, having breakfast. He slipped over before daylight this morning. I found the poor little thing sound asleep with his shoe shine kit on the back porch."

I follow her into the kitchen. Porfie

is there, all right. So is Ed Sampson. Ed gives me the kind of a grin you'd expect from a man who ought to be back punching cows. I see the grin and I think of ten bucks down the drain and all of a sudden I wish I am someplace else. But fast.

Guys like this Ed Sampson just don't understand things like this, Mac. He thinks I am down here to see this lulu. It's not that at all, but you just try and explain anything so complicated to a man who ought to be back riding a horse.

"Good morning, Señor Palomo," Porfie says brightly from back of the toast in one hand.

"Hello, dearie," Ed grins nastily. "Nice of you to offer to help out while you're off duty. I never knew you liked me so much, Jess."

"I only came down," I begin lamely, feeling my molars grind, "to pick up this alien in case he got past the tower. I have about decided to file proceedings against him."

"That a fact? In other words, boy, you figure the tax payers should pay his board so you won't have to. . . ."

Those next ten minutes are rugged, Mac! That Mexican had been so happy over the ten bucks that he'd spilled the chili; and Porfie, bless his sharp little tongue, has come right back to his "mamacita" with the whole story about how the big palomo who had chased him and arrested him was now his new papa because he was paying for meals and a nice bed with real quilts.

I am sizzling, Mac. This lulu is looking at me with something in those glims that wasn't there yesterday morning. Ed is drinking his coffee and grinning that cat grin and saying he hopes I won't cry when his driver comes back from another call and they take Porfie back across the line again.

I get out of there in some kind of a strategic retreat, Mac. Don't ask me how because it's still a little hazy. The only consolation I can take is that in a day or two Porfie will have his passport and then I will be out of the mess. So I'm his new papa now. Hoh!

When I go back on duty next day Porfie has his passport. I breathe a big sigh when the Chief calls him in and gives it to him personally. I see the kid look at it and damned if I don't think he's going to cry.

"But I don't want it!" he yells.

"You must have that passport when you across the line, Porfie." Karns explains carefully. "You must show it to the officers like the other Mexicans do. You must not come to Douglas anymore through the fences."

"I do not like this passport," Porfie says firmly, looking the Chief right in the eye. "If I have this paper, the palomos won't chase me anymore. I have to walk all the way back to Mexico. But when I don't have it they bring me back in the fine car."

WE FINALLY get rid of him, and I breathe another big sigh of relief. I go back on the car with Ed and I am a new man. Life is wonderful for a whole week. Of course, I've had to drop down by Mary's—I mean that lulu's house a few times on and off duty just to make sure that things are all right, and they are very much all right.

Ed Sampson won't hardly speak to me anymore, Mac. But then I told you an ex-horse straddler like him can't understand things like this.

So we have a whole week until Porfie finally gets wise. He tears up his passport one day, and the fireworks start all over again. We threaten him and Mary scolds him and the Chief is beginning to scowl now. He gives them all the best break he can, but he's got to go by the rule book too.

I've been thinking things over and figure it can't go on. So I draw in a deep breath and light the match to the fuse. I take Porfie down before the U.S. Commissioner and file Federal charges against him for illegally entering the United States.

Mac, I started something!

I knew what Mary was going to say and she said it. My ears are still burning. The ice was back in her eyes and it wasn't a couple of cubes. It was the whole tray.

"To think that you'd do such a contemptible thing," she cries, dabbing at her eyes and sniffing. "That poor little orphan b-baby in a jail, to be tried before a Federal judge like a common criminal. I hope I never set eyes on you again as long as I live!"

I am sweating around the collar by the time I get into the clear again. That was bad, Mac. But I didn't count on the reaction from the other boys. They'd been pretty fond of the kid after all and would hardly speak to me. All except Ed. He would speak to me again.

"You did just the right thing, boy," he says, giving me a friendly slap on the shoulder. "Shows you've got the stuff. The old college spirit. Well, I got to run along. I'm taking Mary to the movies tonight. The poor kid is so upset over what you did that I'm trying to get her mind off it."

I go home wondering if a body can be identified if it's chopped up in small pieces and I don't sleep much during the days until Porfie's trial comes up in Federal Court in Tuscon. You ever hear of the word pariah, Mac? It's about the same as parasite. The same kind we used to get over in the jungles.

A louse, that's me, Mac. I see it everytime one of the boys look at me. I don't even see Mary at all. The news I get from her is secondhand. Through Ed. He is a very happy man these days.

I am a very unhappy man, Mac. But I figure I was right and that's that.

Porfie's trial opens in Tuscon one morning at ten o'clock. I bring him over from the jail to the courthouse. He's beginning to fill out a little from the regular meals, and he's even got a few bucks. The soft hearted jailer has let him take his bola kit inside.

I take him into the judge's chambers where I'd asked the hearing to be held. The State's Attorney is prosecuting. He comes in with a brief of the case and my statements of evidence. Then right behind comes Mary. She runs over and takes Porfie in her arms. The interpreter comes in too, watching her.

She won't even look at me, Mac.

"A-hem," the judge says, clearing his throat. "I—ah—believe that we now might consider this court in session."

He gets the proceedings under way. While I give my testimony Porfie sits beside Mary. He's all eager and excited about the fuss being made over him. He listens while the interpreter explains what's going on. He kept busting up the works by eagerly asking his state appointed attorney and the judge, "Will you send me to the jail, Señores? Will you, will you?" I thought Mary was going to cry.

That was an uncomfortable half hour, Mac. I keep looking at Mary and wanting to tell her I think I've done what I ought to, but she gives me that cold stare and won't even blink.

Pretty soon the evidence is all in and the defense attorney tells the judge he guesses he'll rest and not make any defense. The judge clears his throat again.

"I have considered all the aspects of this case," he says. "I have heard the evidence of both the—ah—prosecution and defense witnesses. Therefore, I find the prisoner guilty and sentence him to four years at the industrial school in Washington, D. C."

SOMETHING like a small cry breaks from Mary. She grabs Porfie and hugs him close and I figure I better get out. I sort of do a sneak out the door while he gets her handkerchief and wipes her eyes and jabbers Spanish at her like a string of firecrackers going off. He's telling her about him and me and the judge framing it up so he could get four years in *Los Estados Unidos* to learn English and a trade, with lots of good food and a real clean bed with sheets on it. He's going to come back to Mexico and get himself a big new car and make a taxi out of it.

I wait in the hallway and pretty soon she comes out. She's wiping her eyes. I start to go on but she says, "Wait, Jess."

She comes up and lays a hand on my arm. The ice is gone from her eyes, Mac. She don't look like a school teacher now, and what she says don't sound like one either.

"You big overgrown lug," she almost hisses. "So you had it all framed up, didn't you? A free education and a chance to get started out right, and you wouldn't tell me, would you? Why?"

I tell her I don't seem to be so hot at explaining some things, like that first morning in her back yard and then when I went down the next morning too.

"I never saw a kid so happy," she says kind of softly. "His eyes were actually shining. And when I told him that perhaps some day I can adopt him—"

What is she saying, Mac! Adopt him, huh? This lulu gets sore at me for what I do for Porfie, then she's glad about it, so now she and that little cuss have pulled a frame on *me*. I hadn't planned on anything like that, Mac. Troubles you got?

I didn't plan on what hapened five minutes later either. I had to wait that long to get this lulu—I mean Mary out in the privacy of my car where I can really cut loose on her, on account of it wouldn't look good for a Federal officer to be bawling out—I mean kissing a girl right in the hallways of a courthouse where there is a dozen other people present.

As I said, Mac, the rule books say we gotta be dignified.

RAIN, RAIN, GO AWAY

By CORD McKAY

Prayer is as powerful as dry ice—in fact, more so!

RAINMAKERS have been fairly common throughout the world; in times of drought when the welfare of great groups of people has been threatened by lack of rainfall, men have come forward claiming supernatural ability to make it rain. But in the equatorial mountains of Africa where rain is usually all too plentiful, the natives have a man who makes the rain stay away as much as possible.

The rain man blows a whistle to make threatening black clouds blow over, or to stop the rain once it has started to fall. The power is believed to reside in the whistle, and only secondarily in the man who blows it. This instrument of magic is a strange sort of metal tube, wrapped in banana leaves. If the regular rain man is indisposed or for some other reason is unable to discharge his duties, then someone else will take over, but with only fair results, as there seems to be a certain skill necessary to the operation of the whistle, which the rain man has perfected.

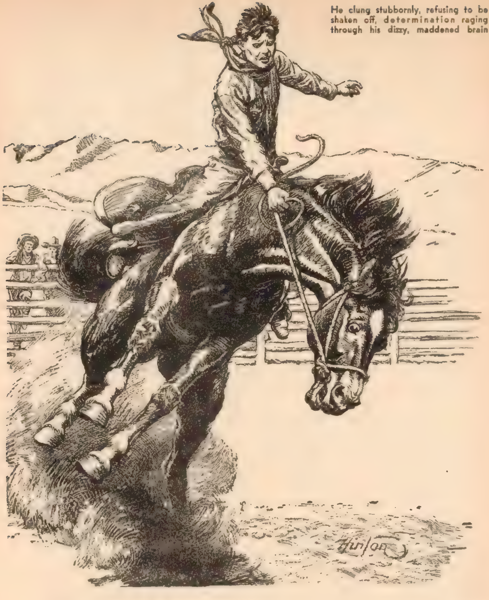
If the clouds begin to roll up some morning when the tribe is tired of rain, or especially wants sunshine, then the rain man blows a few blasts on his whistle, and the clouds pass on. If a few drops of rain begin to fall, the blasts become loud and frantic. Should a quick deluge or hailstorm descend, then the rain man nearly bursts with his efforts, until the storm passes away.

The rain man's prestige in his tribe is enormous. He, himself, has implicit faith in his powers. Perhaps that great faith is in some measure effective, and accounts for the apparent success of his efforts.

BUNKHOUSE PUNCHER

by Richard Irving

Dave had to show them that he was a man—even if it meant standing up to Larkin's hate!



He clung stubbornly, refusing to be shaken off, determination raging through his dizzy, maddened brain

DAVE sat a little too quietly on his bunk. He was alone with his grey thoughts in the deserted bunkhouse. There was still a few minutes left before he had to go back to work.

The door slammed, and Dave looked up from his thoughts to see the beefy figure of Larkin standing near his bunk.

Larkin took a step toward Dave.

"You here punk. What's the matter, your job in the kitchen too much for you today?" he said sarcastically.

Dave moved uneasily on his bunk,

ignoring Larkin. The beefy puncher liked to ride people.

"For a kid only seventeen you're mighty proud, a little too proud," he said through compressed lips. He wanted to get a rise out of Dave.

For a moment there was a tense silence until somewhere a fly buzzed.

Larkin's harsh voice boomed. "Hey, punk, I'm talking to you!"

Dave stirred uncomfortably.

"Hey kid, the boys tell me that you want to be a puncher," Larkin jeered. "What's the matter, don't you like riding pots and pans. Can't get hurt that way."

Dave stood up, looked deliberately at Larkin, and said softly, "Go to hell!"

Larkin stiffened suddenly. "What's that, punk?" he said as if he hadn't heard correctly. Dave's eyes were on him, unflinching.

Larkin set his jaw and took a short quick step toward Dave.

"Why you little squeak! I gotta good mind to gun whip you!'

The door slammed and Lou the foreman strode in.

He shot an appraising look at Dave and Larkin.

"What you doing here, Larkin?" he said in a flat even voice. "You're supposed to be out in the corral. What the devil am I paying you for? To loaf around the bunkhouse?"

For a moment Larkin glared at Lou. There was no love between the two men. Then brushing past the foreman, Larkin shuffled from the bunkhouse.

Lou put his calloused hand on Dave's bunkpost. He said quietly, "Kid, it's time you were getting back to work too."

Dave nodded, thinking, "Lou's tough but a square shooter."

Lou started to leave when Dave said, "Hey, boss, can I talk to you?" The foreman stopped and said, "Sure kid, what's on your mind?"

"Well, ah . . . ah . . . it's this way boss. I want to do punching."

Lou studied the kid's face carefully.

"Son, I'd like to help you. I like your spunk," he said kindly. "But cow punching's a rough business. Take bronc busting. A man can get hurt bad. No, son, I couldn't let you do punching for a while."

Dave broke in, "It's because I'm only seventeen, that it?"

"No, son, it's not your age exactly. But you are kind of skinny and cow punching usually takes a big man."

Dave looked down at his feet. Biting his lips he said in a barely audible voice. "O.K. boss, thanks just the same."

As he started to leave again, Lou asked, "Was that lazy saddle tramp Larkin riding you, kid?"

Dave thought fast and shot back, "Naw, he wasn't bothering me any."

"Well, I was just wondering. I never liked his looks. Had to take him on a couple months ago because we was short handed."

Dave nodded and the two walked out of the bunkhouse together.

IT WAS after supper, and Dave was finishing up the last of the pots and pans. He vigorously scraped the inside of a large pan, wanting to get it spotless, hurrying so that he could get away soon from the grease and smoke. The job was monotonous but Dave was conscientous. He would never put any dirty utensils back on the shelf. If he wasn't careful the men could get sick from greasy pans or something like that.

In some ways it wasn't a bad job. He was his own boss in the kitchen and the pay was all right. He was dissatisfied only because he wanted to cow punch. And lately, the more he dreamed about his desire, the harder it was to put up with the kitchen job. Of course, he felt disappointed about what Lou had told him in the bunkhouse, but a feller had to have hope. Maybe something would come up and he'd get his chance. . . .

Carried on the wind from the corral came the familiar round-up cries of the punchers. They were out there, gathering in the cattle before sundown. In a few minutes he'd go out there and watch them.

He neatly piled the last of the dishes in a drawer, and went over to the basin to clean up. A minute later, after taking a last look around the kitchen to see that everything was in its place, he put on his hat and left for the corral.

It was some three hundred yards from the cook-shack to the corral, and Dave walked them at a leisurely pace. It was like that, the minute he got in the outdoors, he'd begin to forget about the steam and grease of the kitchen, begin to feel better immediately.

It was a clear day and looking out over the unobstructed horizon he could spot the familiar lines of hills seven and eight miles off. If ever he moved away from this part of the country, he'd miss those hills. They were the first things he looked for on rising in the morning. Along their rims now, Dave watched edges of pink and purple hue growing with the coming sundown.

BY THE time Dave got there, little activity was taking place in the corral. The men had gotten most of the horses corraled for the night. In a few minutes they'd be going back to the bunkhouse after the day's work.

Dave stood on the second rail of the corral fence and watched the punchers. Swell bunch of fellers, he thought, glancing at their hard, clean bodies and sunburnt faces riding by. And they really knew their jobs. They could take the snakiest kind of wall-eyed range horses and tame them into finished saddle horses. True, riding herd wasn't easy, but at least they were on the outdoors all day.

A sharp wild bray startled Dave and he looked over to his left to see a big, chestnut stallion rearing up. It was the Old Outlaw. Dave involuntarily grinned in respect to the ornery horse who had a reputation for knowing more tricks to unseat a rider than a tinhorn shark does about a deck of playing cards. There was an animal he'd like to take a crack at riding some day! Only the best of bronc busters could stay with the Old Outlaw.

A familiar unpleasing voice droned behind him. "Well, look who's here. Our proud little kitchenhand himself!"

Dave didn't have to turn to know that it was Larkin. The beefy puncher climbed up on the rail beside him and pointed toward the Old Outlaw. "Quite a mean critter, ain't he," Larkin said slyly. Dave nodded.

Larkin's voice took on a suspiciously confidential tone.

"You know, punk, I sure can't understand why you want to be a puncher. It's dangerous work you'd be getting into. Every so often the boss would ask you to bust a bronc like the Old Outlaw there. Naw, punching's not for a skinny kid like you. A man's got to be able to take it. You'd better stay in the kitchen. It's a lot safer riding pots and pans."

Dave's face reddened. "That's the second time today you've made that crack, Larkin." He started to say something else, broke off, and before Larkin could snap back he said, "I wouldn't be afraid to ride the Old Outlaw."

Larkin's eyes blinked several times, and then he gave a thin laugh. "You can't kid me, punk. You're too yellow to try riding that horse. You'd be scared he might break your neck."

Dave grinned challengingly at Larkin. "I'd be willing to take my chances."

For a moment Larkin stared scornfully at Dave. Then he slapped his thigh and sneered, "I could fix it up for you to ride him right now. How about it?"

Dave looked down blankly at his hands and said calmly, "Sure, why not?"

Larkin leaned closer, searching Dave's down-turned face. "If that critter hurts you I don't want you telling the boss I got you to ride him. You gotta say it was all your idea, punk," he said solicitously.

"O.K.," Dave said impatiently, "it was my idea. Now clear out and bring on the Old Outlaw."

Larkin forced another thin laugh and then swung over the rail, droping into the inside of the corral. Dave watched him swagger over toward the Old Outlaw. He realized that Larkin had tricked him into riding the wild stallion, but it was too late to back out of it now.

HIS stomach began to knot up as he imagined himself getting thrown. He fought against the rising fear. He wasn't going to give Larkin the satisfaction of seeing him back down. Larkin would tell the punchers if he did and they would think he was yellow.

Larkin flipped a loop around the Old Outlaw and led him back toward Dave. The willful horse tugged against the rope. While the two men were struggling to screw a rigg onto the stubborn stallion, Len, one of the punchers, appeared and wanted to know what was happening.

Larkin said, "The punk got the brainstorm that he wants to ride the Old Outlaw. I tried to warn him, but he's set on killing himself. I'm obliged to help him rig up this ornery critter."

"You know the boss gave orders that nobody should try to ride this horse unless he said it was O.K."

"Sure, I remember, Len," Larkin said, a hard gleam showing in his eyes, "but the kid wants to be a puncher. I say let's give him a chance." He turned toward Dave. "Ain't that right, punk?" he said acidly.

Dave said nothing.

Len threw up his hands in disgust and walked away.

Watching the wild-eyed stallion pound the turf, Dave was thinking, "You couldn't trust the Old Outlaw. There'd be no warning when he went wild. And when he got that way, it was impossible to stick with him. If a man fell the wrong way he could be trampled to death. . . ."

The rigg was screwed on and Larkin stepped back. He snarled at Dave, "Get up, yellow!"

Dave facetiously tipped his hat to Larkin and slid onto the Outlaw. He slipped his boot heels up against the oxbows. There was a nervous twitch in his legs that he hoped Larkin would not notice.

Len, who was watching from a few yards away, yelled at Dave, "Get a deep seat, son! Screw down tight to that old boy!"

A moment later Dave signaled that he was ready. Larkin turned the Outlaw loose. Dave threw both hooks into the horse's shoulders. The stallion leapt up, facing the east and came down facing the west. Dave was thrown out of his timing. Without giving his rider a chance to catch his balance, the Outlaw stampeded for about fifty yards and then "broke in two" in the middle of a dead run.

Dave was conscious of being jolted up and down, of the land and air whirling by. He saw, in flashes, the faces of Len and Larkin. He heard Larkin's whoop—"Ride 'em, cowboy!"

He clung stubbornly, refusing to be shaken off, determination raging through his dizzy brain. Leaping and twisting, suddenly the stallion got completely out of hand. He struck out angrily with a dozen crooked bucks in all directions. Reared up with an extra vicious lunge. "Swapped ends." And started back with an empty saddle.

Dave was thrown hard, hitting the turf with a jar. He lay flat for a while, the wind knocked out of him, cobwebs in his head.

HE GOT up slowly and found that though his arms and shoulders were severely bruised, no bones were broken. He began dusting off his clothes.

Larkin had watched Dave's performance with surprise. He wouldn't even admit to himself that the kid had turned in a good show for a first try at bronc busting. As Dave was getting to his feet, Larkin walked over to him, jeering, "Better stick to the pots and pans, punk."

Len came up and asked Dave, "You O.K., son?" Dave nodded.

"You gave the Outlaw a good ride. I was proud of you," Len said warmly.

Dave glanced at Larkin, catching the disappointed expression on his face.

Larkin spit on the ground and tried to laugh. "Boy, did you notice how scared the punk looked," he said to Len, avoiding Dave's eyes.

Len refrained from comment and Larkin muttered, "Just plain yellow, that's what he is."

Dave's voice shot out, "Go to hell, Larkin!"

The beefy puncher blinked as if he were trying to shake himself out of a daze. He fairly reeled with anger. "What the hell is the matter with you, punk?"

Dave said just loud enough for it to reach Larkin's ears, "Why don't you shut your long-winded mouth!"

Larkin blanched. "Who do you think you're talking to you, you lousy kitchen hand!" he cried.

Dave took a breath. "Loud bark, small bite Larkin," he said, smiling.

"I've got a good mind to knock that smile down your throat!"

Dave knew that he could say one more word and have Larkin swinging. Or he could apologize and let him cool down. He weighed the alternatives for a moment and then he said, "Well, why don't you try it?"

Len, who had been silently standing nearby all the while, started to step in between the two men. His voice rose in alarm, "Now fellers—"

Dave gently pushed him aside. "Leave us be, Len," he said.

"But, kid," Len pleaded, "you're bruised bad. This is no time to fight him."

Dave waved Len's advice away. "He's been aching for a fight with me since the first day he got here. And this is as good a time as any."

Larkin swung first. Dave was ready and the blow went harmlessly over his shoulder. The two men were about as tall as each other but besides Dave's ripped shoulder and arms, Larkin had a heavy weight advantage. Dave figured to keep away at first, stab him from a distance, try to tire him out, then finish him later.

But Larkin was far from being a pushover. He came in close, grabbed Dave, pounded him around the ribs. Dave tried to pull away, but Larkin's grip was too strong. Larkin kept plowing in blows to the mid-section. Dave pulled away finally, leaving a piece of his shirt in Larkin's hand.

Suddenly some of the cow hands rushed up to the two men and began pulling them apart. At this moment an authoritative voice rang out, "Leave them alone, boys!" It was Lou, the foreman, standing by himself near the corral rail. It was hard telling how long he had been there, watching the fight.

The men released the two fighters and stepped back.

Larkin and Dave moved into the center of the corral, trading punches. Dave took a low blow to his stomach, and stepped back to catch his breath. Larkin swarmed in, catching Dave again and again with flicking jabs. All the kid could do was to stick out his left feebly, and move away slowly.

DAVE began tiring. His shoulder felt numb. There was the taste of blood in his mouth. He played for time, letting Larkin do most of the swinging. Larkin began to grunt and puff. The sweat shone on his grim face. He began to throw less punches. Time was on Dave's side.

Then—Dave connected solidly with a right hook. The blood spurted out of Larkin's nose. Some of it splattered on Dave's sport shirt. Dave moved in fast to follow up his opening. But suddenly the ground came up and walloped him across the face. Out of a fog, he pushed himself up on his hands and knees, shook the buzzing out of his brain.

Larkin, panting hard, waited until Dave got up, and then he shuffled over to continue the attack. He banged a left into Dave's belly, crossed with a right to the chest. Dave doubled over, dropping his guard. Bent over, he circled like a cart wheel, trying to gulp air. Larkin upper-cutted a left, missed, connected, missed. Dave began to wobble, tried to back away, tried to breathe.

Posed for the kill, Larkin tracked Dave, and then—with his remaining strength, lashed out with a blazing right.

Dave was driven up against the corral fence. Larkin methodically measured him and drove in another right. Dave's knees buckled, and he went down into a sitting position. Only the fence kept him from stretching out full length. When he opened his eyes it seemed to be very dim in the corral. Glassy-eyed, he looked for Larkin and couldn't find him. He was thinking—not too clearly—about somehow getting back on his feet when Lou's face bent over him. Faintly, he heard the foreman asking, "Kid, you all right?"

Out of bruised lips Dave whispered, "Sure, boss."

Dave began to see more light now. The faces of the punchers were grouped in a circle above him. Someone was saying that he had put up a good fight. And then somebody else—he thought it was Len's voice—said, "if he hadn't been hurt, falling from the Outlaw, the kid might have licked Larkin at that."

Dave watched the foreman straighten up and speak to one of the faces above him.

"Larkin, I saw the whole thing, including the kid's ride on the Outlaw." The foreman's voice shot out sharply. "You put him up to that ride even though you knew it was against my orders. You wanted the kid to get hurt bad."

LARKIN'S gaze dropped to the ground. He played with a ring on his finger, trying to find words to fight back the foreman's accusations. But he felt empty and beaten inside. He knew Len was there, waiting for him to lie.

Lou took Larkin's silence as acknowledgement of his guilt.

"Larkin," he said, getting sore, "pack up and get off this ranch pronto! If I catch you here in the morning, you and me is going to tangle!"

Larkin left, followed by the resentful eyes of the punchers.

Lou helped lift Dave to his feet. The punchers, still discussing the fight, turned and started walking to the bunkhouse, leaving the foreman and Dave alone.

Lou threw Dave a handkerchief and the kid began mopping up his face.

"You got a nice shinner under your left eye and your lip is banged up, but you'll be all right. You put up a good fight, son."

Dave looked at the foreman unbelievingly. "But I lost," he said painfully.

Lou chuckled. "No, you tried your best, son. Proved you can take it. I couldn't ask for more than that from anybody."

The two were silent for a moment and then Lou said, "Incidentally, we're short a puncher now that Larkin's gone. How would you like to take over his job?"

Dave answered quickly, "I'd like it fine."

KANSAS INCIDENT

By BILL CRAMPTON

CALLET, Kansas, was a sleepy little town on the Kansas and Western Railway, and it served as a way station for goods and settlers going West in 1874. That is, it was a sleepy town in the winter. In the summer when two and three trains a day were passing through it, it was active enough. But this particular winter's day in November, the whole town lay blanketed under a fall of snow that made it impossible for even the trains to move.

At the ramshackle wooden station at the North end of the town, a typical wood-burner of the Kansas and Western Lines stood. The five foot blizzard of the day before had practically immersed the train in snow and all that was visible was the locomotive where the engineer, George Layton and his fireman Bob Corwin still kept up steam, for it would not do to let the locomotive freeze up. The train was carrying a load of mining machinery on its seven cars as well as a great

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The conductor—one of those unsung heroes of the West—was Jack Lathrop, a native Kansan and as rough and tough as they come. He was dozing in the station, after having helped his fireman and engineer to keep up steam. He was taking a well-deserved rest. Outside the wind howled and flurries of snow swept viciously over the high-piled drifts. The glowing stove in the railway station cast its warmth within a radius of ten feet. The station master had long since gone home and the telegraph key was silent. The lines had been knocked down long since and it would take a long time before the blizzard's effects were dissipated.

Suddenly the door to the station opened and two men walked in. Both were masked and heavily furred and booted. Each held a six-gun in his hand. Striding over to the dozing conductor, one of them roughly shook him. Startled Jack Lathrop jerked awake. Half-asleep he peered at his assailant. At the sight of the gun his hands went skyward. He wasn't going to argue with a foregone conclusion.

He knew what they wanted. Somehow it had leaked out, that stuck in the cab of the locomotive was a metal box with thirty thousand dollars in gold in it for the payroll of the Letter Construction Company in western Kansas which Lathrop was supposed to drop off.

"WHERE is the gold?" the hold-up man shot at Jack. Lathrop grinned. The masked man reached out and with his gloved hand slapped Jack across the face. That was too much. Like a lightning bolt, the sleepy looking conductor whirled, bent almost double and closed the four feet between his questioner and himself. He got a grip on the man's gun arm before he could shoot. And so they struggled. The attacker's companion could not fire for fear of arousing the fireman and the engineer in the cab twenty feet away. He closed in however and tried to slug Jack Lathrop. It wasn't the first time that Lathrop had tangled with railroad agents. His own gun was beneath his coat and so he couldn't get at it, but fortunately he managed to twist the attacker's gun from him. There was a muffled shot as he fired close against the man's body. He sank to the floor—hurt, but his pal, realizing the jig was up, started to shoot wildly at Jack. One of the shots caught Jack in the left shoulder, but like a flash he winged the agent. The man turned, badly wounded and started for the door only to run into the arms of Jack's engineer and fireman who had heard the shooting.

Lathrop, clutching his wounded shoulder tried to question the man but his shooting had been too accurate. The man dropped to the floor—dead. The first assailant however was merely wounded and as the three men questioned him, it came out that somebody in the pay-office had told them what the train was carrying. They thought it would be an easy haul and to save time looking, they decided to tackle the conductor. They didn't know that Jack Lathrop was a tough and experienced hand at that sort of thing and consequently they took it in the neck.

The Kansas and Western gave Jack no special commendation. It was in the line of his duty, they thought. Jack Lathrop's name came up many more times in precarious situations, where only quick and straight shooting saved him. Someday someone will compile a history of Western heroes and they'll have sense enough to include a gang of the best—the railway men who opened up the west!

* * *

MOUNTAINEER'S ADVENTURE

A FAMOUS name in the West of long ago was that of John Colter. He was one of the members of the Lewis and Clark expedition which explored the Missouri River, crossed the Continental Divide and went on to the Pacific. When they returned, heading for St. Louis to make their report and receive a heroes' welcome, Colter decided to leave the party. He had seen the richness of the beaver to be had in the rivers of the West, and he became one of the first of the fur trappers in that region.

With a friend named Potts, he was paddling down-river one day when suddenly he saw a number of Blackfeet Indians on the shore. Potts had not time to turn, but was instantly peppered with arrows. In the fraction of a second's warning which he had, Colter dived into the river.

The Blackfeet swarm after him, caught him and dragged him onto the bank. Instead of burning him at the stake, or otherwise torturing him in some tame manner, they decided to have some sport with him. They stripped off his clothes, told him to run, and gave him a hundred yard start. Then the young warriors started in pursuit.

Colter had toughness and endurance, and though hampered by bare feet, began to outdistance the band, all except one speedy lad who swiftly closed in on him. When almost upon him, the Indian started to swing a lance at Colter. Colter stopped suddenly, and spat tobacco juice between the eyes of the redskin. In the split second of the Indian's surprise, Colter grabbed the lance and plunged it through the heart of his enemy.

The rest of the Blackfeet, seeing this, redoubled their efforts to catch Colter, and he was in a bad way. Racing onward, he came to the river and plunged in, coming up under a mass of trash and logs. Here he clung until dark, undetected by the Blackfeet, who searched the shore and even ran over the logs which sheltered him.

When the redskins finally gave up and went away, Colter, shivering with cold and nakedness, climbed out of the water and set out for the nearest trading fort.

He told of springs of boiling hot water, some of them shooting far into the air at regular intervals; of bubbling springs of mud, of a huge lake, and a great waterfall. His listeners thought he must be a little "touched" by his naked ordeal, and someone remarked that it sounded like a hell of a country. "Colter's hell," said another. And so the place came to be called "Colter's Hell," for the mountain men found that Colter had not lied and that there was indeed such a place of bubbling mud and hot shooting springs. Later on the place was given a more dignified name—Yellowstone National Park. *—By J. Byrne.*

NARROW-GAUGE RAILWAY

By J. LESLIE

SCATTERED throughout the West are the rusting remnants of many miniature railroads—by "miniature" is meant narrow gauge. Usually these are found near abandoned minesites. The story of narrow gauge railroads and the part that they played in opening up the West is a fascinating one. They have none of the great impressiveness of their big brothers, the standard gauge railroads, but they performed their job well.

A great deal of the industrial strength of the United States comes from its mines and in turn a great many of the most important mines were and are out West. Copper, lead, and zinc—extremely important metals in the electrical civilization that was developing in the nineties—came for the most part, not from foreign imports, but from the mines in the West.

The wealthy railroads would not necessarily build spurs leading to any mine that was discovered, no matter how valuable, unless they shared a good deal of the profit. Sometimes, it must be said to their credit, it was not feasible economically. Yet the ore had to be taken to refineries or delivered either in the form of ore or metal to main line roads in order to be taken East and sold. If the railroads cooperated—fine, but if they didn't it was necessary for the mine-owner to build his own. Now building and running a railroad is a gigantic enterprise, no matter how small the road, consequently a crude road and a small one, usually in the form of a narrow gauge railroad, was built. Small locomotives were purchased, and simple ore cars were hauled to the major main lines of regular roads. The narrow gauge roads were operated by the mine-owners. After the mine had been worked out, or with the coming of the truck, the narrow gauge road fell into disuse and was abandoned. But in its short and active life the narrow gauge railroad made western history.

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The Company, organized about eighteen ninety-three, produced copper ore from its mines, refined it on the spot, and shipped the pigs of metal eleven miles over the roughest narrow gauge railroad in the West—the "C.C.M. & C." This road led its devious and tortuous path over short mountainous territory to the town of Casana which practically was supported and maintained by the company. A spur of the Southern Pacific led Eastward to a main line branch of the road and the refined copper went this way.

THE "C.C.M. & C." was run by two veterans—not of the rails—but of the horse. Shorty Haines, a bow-legged, good-humored veteran of the Apache warfare days, and his side-kick, a young kid by the name of Billy Clayton, ran the railroad. Their duties were very simple. Once a day they made the round trip out to the mine, picked up a load of copper pigs, returned to town, had the three flat cars unloaded, and repeated the trip the next day and the next. They also furnished transportation for any miners going into town in the evenings.

Such a job might seem monotonous, but it wasn't, for the trip held more elements of danger than we like to imagine. To begin with, the narrow gauge roadbed wasn't in the best of condition, and there were spots where the chugging little locomotive could hardly make the grades. But Shorty and Billy tended it like a baby and usually managed to make it work its puffing way to and from the town. The trip was invariably a slow and hair-raising procedure.

Old-timers love to tell of the time Shorty was chased by his infernal train. The three flat cars had been heavily loaded that day with massive pigs of copper—it had been an unusually productive day, and Shorty and his fireman had to nurse their grunting charge all the way. Half-way to Casana, while the train was going slowly downgrade with Shorty judiciously applying the brakes, the coupling between the tender and the first flat-car broke. The locomotive's brakes slipped and it shot forward like a bullet—now released of its load. But because of the down-grade, the heavily-laden flat-cars gathered momentum and

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started to overtake the locomotive! To top it off, in the jerk that ensued at the parting of the cars, Shorty slipped forward, his six-gun went off at his side and he suffered a nasty wound in his right leg. But Shorty was made of stern stuff. He ignored the wound.

THE flat-cars were overtaking the locomotive with ever-increasing speed and if Shorty had sped up the engine to avoid them, eventually they would have derailed themselves on the uneven track. Shorty sent Billy to the end of the small tender and told him to get ready to put a new pin in the coupler—trains were coupled in those days with a crude pin-socket arrangement—and Billy poised precariously on the end of the tender with the cars coming at him faster and faster.

Shorty payed no attention to his wound, but with infinite skill he began to match the speed of the engine to the oncoming cars. Inch by inch the cars began to overtake the engine until with superb judgment, Shorty had them in position and Billy, still balancing dangerously, managed to drop in the necessary pin which had sheared.

Then gradually applying the brakes, Shorty managed to halt the juggernaut which had threatened him. All was well! He made it.

Only then did he turn over the throttle to Billy while he looked at his wound. Cursing in true fighter fashion, he bound it up with his shirt; the doc could take out the bullet.

While this event has its humorous aspects, not all troubles were of that sort. Train-robbers liked the narrow gauges too, because often they carried payrolls. In addition they were often operated in territory containing hostile Indians and a rifle was as important as a shovel in any locomotive.

The service these short-haul railroads rendered to general American welfare is incalculable, and now, though only a few rusting rails remain with perhaps the remnants of a sod-covered boiler, the narrow gauge railroad will be remembered for a long time for the services it offered to the early West.

MYSTERIOUS MIGRATION

By JOSEPH WARD

THE fact that birds migrate is common knowledge, and easily observed in the spring and autumn of the year. Naturalists have charted their journeys and studied their habits in detail. It is a lesser known fact that many insects and also fish migrate to warmer climates for the winter months. The habits of these creatures present many mysteries to the scientists who strive to learn their secrets.

The familiar black and orange Monarch butterflies flock with their kind and fly southward in a great mass as the autumn temperatures drop.

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Sometimes they have been observed flying along in single file, and sometimes in great clouds moving very high and very swiftly. Occasionally the swarm alights to rest, and the numbers have been estimated at thousands, even hundreds of thousands. Where are they going? How do they spend the winter? Do they return in the spring? Probably many of them die along the way, but some of them undoubtedly reach the southern parts of the United States. There they spend the winter months in some form of hibernation. Pale, ragged-winged Monarchs have been seen flying northward in the springtime, and it must be that they are the same which searched for a warmer climate the preceding autumn, and have come back to complete their migration, moved by some irresistible force of Nature.

Several species of dragon flies have been observed to fly in a southerly direction in the autumn, and northerly in the spring. An autumn leavetaking of the north has also been noted in other species of insects. Is this a true migration? Why and how are these movements made? There is very little data on the subject, but there is reason to believe that prevailing winds and barometric pressure may account in part for these insect flights.

The ocean experiences great autumnal migrations. Many fish desert their summer haunts, as do crabs, lobsters and other sea animals. The sea birds which follow this seasonal movement are the betrayal that it is in progress. They are after the floating fragments of food left by the predacious fish, and follow the underwater masses for many miles. Where are the fish going? Perhaps they hibernate somewhere along the ocean floor. Perhaps they swim southward to warmer waters. The question is unanswered.

The habits and history of many creatures of land, air and water are imperfectly known. Some instinct for survival and a mysterious purpose directs their movements, and leads them through their life cycles in conditions best suited to the continuance of their kind. Man has come but a short way in the solving of the multitudinous enigmas of Nature.

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All Stories Complete

GUNS ACROSS THE DAKOTAS (Novel—95,000) .... by Lathrop W. Hull 8

Illustrated by Robert Gibson Jones

Hub Miller played the game straight—he didn't know that when you become a special agent, there are a lot of angles to consider—money, women . . .

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Illustrated by Boecher

Even if they couldn't speak English, the furriners looked like pretty good people to me—especially Illona—and could they ride and fight!

"DON'T CALL ME PODNUH . . ." (Short—11,400) .... by Berkeley Livingston 146

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You can't shoot a lady—especially if she's willing to sit down to a gambling table and give better than she gets—like little Miss Susan Brown!

Front Cover by Robert Gibson Jones illustrating a scene from "Guns Across The Dakotas."

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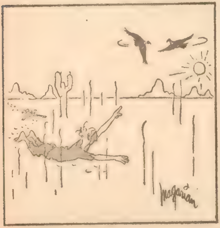
RIDIN' HERD *with the Editor*

HERE it is! Lathrop W. Hull hits us with a terrific novel—and it's long too—"Guns Across the Dakotas." While it's an action-packed fast-moving story in the best western style, it's set in a good deal of history—the depression of '73, Sioux City and the logging camps, and various shady bank manipulations of the period. It's good smooth reading—both interesting and authentic. If you remember, last month we pointed out how Hull had checked a number of facts with the Winchester Arms people in order to be sure. We think that after you read this story, you'll want to have more of Hull—let us know.

"THE FURRINERS" by H. B. Hickey doesn't really need any introduction. Hickey is the kind of a guy that turns in those off-trail sort of westerns that kinda make a guy think. It's not that he goes "significant" on us, but the old think-tank starts humming. This is one of those stories and it's really good. It seems a bunch of Hungarian farmers are trying to . . .

BERKELEY LIVINGSTON'S "Don't Call Me Podnuh . . ." is, as usual, one of his modern westerns with the almost comic touch. Everytime Berk touches a typewriter he almost forgets about everything but "let's see, I'll handle this with a humorous twist . . ." Never-the-less "Don't Call Me Podnuh . . ." is a first-rate western that'll have you rockin' crossways.



"Look, Chester, seagulls; we're getting near water."

"GAMBLER's DOWNFALL" by Leonard Finley Hilts in a fine little short brings back memories of a bad day. The hero is Colonel Jim Bowie and even as you read the story, we'll guarantee that the Alamo will be in the back of your mind. It's too bad that Jim Bowie had to die that way, especially when he was so full of living. Bet you never connected Jim Bowie and the Mississippi River steamers!

WE'VE received a lot of favorable comment lately on the features that we've been running. Well, to be frank, not all of the comment has been favorable—that's stretching the truth a little, we'll admit. You see, when a story doesn't end at the bottom of the page, we put in one of these features —"fillers"—we call 'em—and they're usually articles of general interest. Sometimes, an old-timer who was there or who knows his stuff completely will write in and tell us we're all wet. And the funny thing is, more often than not, he's right. By long experience, it's been thoroughly learned, that you can't fool a reader. They're smarter than editors. That's for sure—look at our letters—and their answers!

ON OUR desk right now is the novel for next month, a beautiful job with a different pitch by John Di Silvestro. This is the first time that Di Silvestro has tried his hand at a novel—and the results are as good as some of his first rate shorts that we've run. We want to make a prediction—keep your eye on him—he's going places, and in a hurry, too!

ABOUT the most fascinating job of all in editorial work is going through the mail bag. The minute that an author makes a technical error of some kind, one of you readers jumps on him in a flash! We get a lot of letters from readers who "were there" and consequently, you can rely usually on what an author says. He's afraid to be wrong! He knows what'll happen if he is. Any day now we're expecting some grizzled cowhand to step in the office, walk up to us and say, "Pardner, you got that story all wrong—draw!" When that happens, we're drawing all right—for the protection of the nearest desk! All kidding aside though, gang, keep the letters coming. We'll try and print as many as we can. And don't be afraid to say exactly what you think. We can take it. So long. *—RAP.*

To People Who Want to Write

but can't get started

Do you have the constant urge to write but the fear that a beginner hasn't a chance? Then listen to what the former editor of *Liberty* said on this subject:

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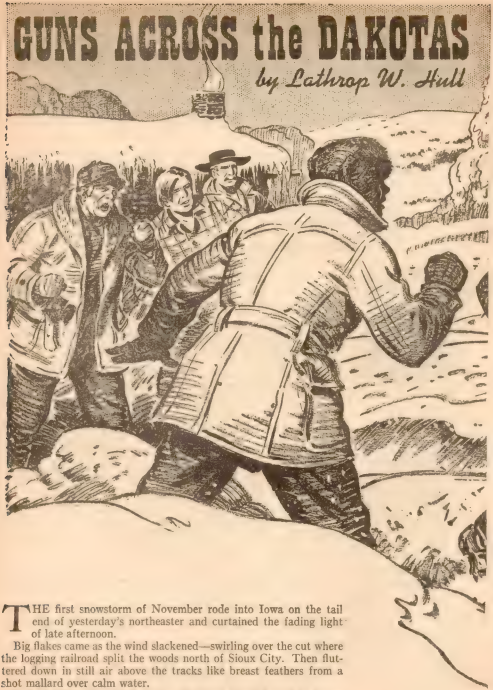
GUNS ACROSS the DAKOTAS

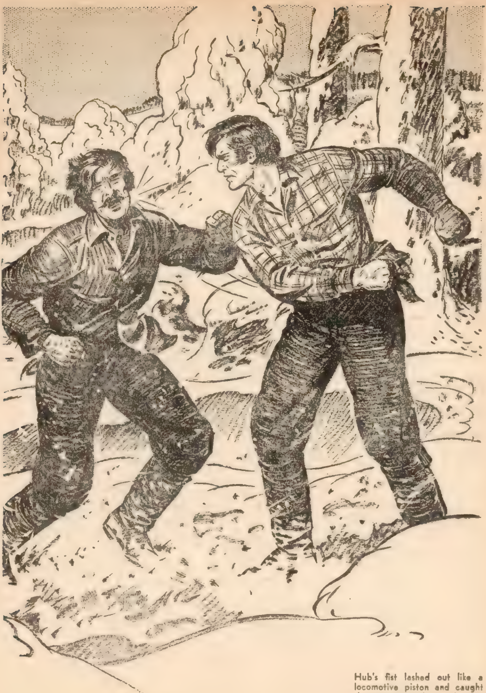
by Lathrop W. Hull



THE first snowstorm of November rode into Iowa on the tail end of yesterday's northeaster and curtained the fading light of late afternoon.

Big flakes came as the wind slackened—swirling over the cut where the logging railroad split the woods north of Sioux City. Then fluttered down in still air above the tracks like breast feathers from a shot mallard over calm water.

Hubert Miller, thought the walls of timber ahead looked as inhos-



Hub's fist lashed out like a locomotive piston and caught the man squarely on the jaw pitable as doors of closed factories he had seen in Chicago. And the task he had set himself to do confined him with a barrier of duty which seemed as impenetrable as the dark swamps on each side of him.

Thirty years old, big and husky, he was not one to give up easily like mumbling, shivering tramps he had seen along the Missouri. Because of Lonnie he could not quit; must find work and earn money.

And this had been so every day since after Appomattox when he had found Lonnie at Andersonville—sick and weak from months in a Confederate prison.

Now Lonnie needed him more than ever. The Chicago specialist had been firm. No doubt of it, the sick boy must go to Colorado Territory. And money or no money, he could not work.

Hub heard Lonnie cough behind him and waited. He let his eyes search lines of timber on each side of the roadbed ahead. He did not know where he was, except that it was miles back to the nearest town and somewhere ahead lay Swanson's tie camps.

He found nothing to say in the cold stillness as Lonnie came up. They had talked enough of their problems. All were less than this one which concerned Lonnie and the need for money. The doctor had told him Lonnie must go at once or he would die.

"Will we ever make those camps?" Lonnie asked as he shuffled up. "If we do, will we get work?"

Hub was head and shoulders taller than this slight boy. Resemblance showed in their high cheek bones and alert brown eyes, but Lonnie's hair was blond and Hub's was dark brown.

"Stop your worrying!"

The command had snapped out of Hub's own concern. He saw Lonnie's crestfallen look; and put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"That Chicago doctor told me worrying was bad for you. The percentage girl at the roadhouse said she heard it wasn't far in to the crossing. She said to watch for a lot of jack pines. Remember?"

"I didn't pay attention to her." Lonnie said thinly. "I heard her say she liked you. Rose was her name. She wasn't so bad. Was she?"

"Her!" Hub started, swinging easily now. His heavy packsack slapped his broad back; and he slowed and adjusted the straps. "I wouldn't be found dead in a graveyard with her, or any of 'em."

They plodded on, kicking spurts of snow with each step. Lonnie trailed behind, out of sight of Hub in the falling snow.

HUB stopped and tried to shake away worry devils. Was there any sense in going on? Since a Michigan lumberman had paid him for his summer's work he had heard talk of hard times and no work. Banks had closed in September. Men said this panic year of 1873 had started the country's finish.

But news he and Lonnie had heard in Council Bluffs had not been too discouraging. Railroad building had caused the crash, yet lines out of Chicago were expanding. Husky men like Hub, a yard boss had suggested, might find work in tie camps up north, although the Union Pacific had taken all the good timber along the Missouri. And a motherly boarding house keeper in Sioux City, sorry for Lonnie, had said to try Swanson's camps below the bend of the Big Sioux River.

At a curve in the tracks Hub stopped. "Here's the jack pines, Lonnie," he called.

He shifted the packsack and straightened the collar of his black wool mackinaw. This pulled the short coat so it barely reached to the hip pockets of his gray wool trousers.

As Lonnie came up Hub heard his breathing. "We'll take it easier now," he said; then bit his lip and frowned as he saw Lonnie's flushed cheeks.

"How much more?"

"That girl, Rose, said to take the road to the left. That's west, I know. Then go not quite a mile, she thought. There's a settler's—Hobbs, I think she said. From there in it's not far to the camps."

Lonnie sat down on a rail and scanned Hub's strong, tanned face. The snowflakes that landed on Lonnie's face vanished like fat flecks on a hot stove. He wore a pair of cheap wool gloves; and the wrists which showed between them and his black coat sleeves were white and thin as an axe helve.

"You suppose we'll get work here, Hub?" he asked.

"I've got to. You know what that doctor told me about you as well as I do. I've got to get you out in the mountains. And enough money to take care of you."

He scowled down at the top of Lonnie's wool cap. "If it weren't for you being sick we could go farther north to the pineries and get work in the lumber camps. Or I could join the army again and fight Indians out West. Maybe get a commission."

Lonnie looked up at him. "You'd be having a good time, too, if it wasn't for me. You'd get married—wouldn't you?"

Hub shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe." Then he smiled at Lonnie. "We'll get work. Don't worry. I've not given up. Gawd, but I'm hungry! You all in?"

"I guess I can make it, if it isn't too far. I wish we hadn't stayed so long at that roadhouse. How much we got left?"

HUB felt in a side pocket of his trousers, a thoughtful expression replacing the smile which had crept in about his mouth and eyes.

"I had twenty-two dollars and forty cents; you had fifteen dollars and a half. I lost eleven at roulette. Dammit! That's always the way. If we hadn't stopped there for a rest we'd have a good thirty-seven dollars. We should have about twenty-five left. It'll do, if we can get work—"

"That roulette wheel was crooked," Lonnie said.

"They all are."

"Then why play them?"

"Most places let you win at first to pull you on. I figured I might double our money."

"Humpf! Not in that place. That fellow moved over to a loose board soon's you started playing. I saw him put his weight on it."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"I didn't like his looks; and he wore a gun."

"Mean-looking cuss, wasn't he. Jipp, the girls called him. That blonde, Rose, told me he runs this country around here. She wants to get out of there. I bought him a drink figuring he might help us find a job."

Lonnie brightened. "Say, Hub, wouldn't it be luck if some way we could get that reward? Then we'd have money ahead, and you could—"

"What reward? I saw reward notices all over the barroom."

"Tie contractors and lumber companies have lost payrolls. There's five hundred dollars up for each robber. If you just get information which leads to their capture or—"

"Come on! It's starting to get dark. You and I won't get any rewards. You don't want any more shooting, anyway, do you?"

Lonnie stood up, shivering, and coughed. Hub shook his head and now his expression became worried-looking—brows taut, his mouth a straight line, and a frown showing between his wide-apart and deep set eyes.

"Unh-uh!" Lonnie managed. "Nor Confederate prisons either."

"If you get too tired, speak up. I'll carry you."

The wind had died. Big snowflakes fluttered down in hushed stillness. Fresh rabbit and deer tracks along the roadbed and across the ties were filling. In the swamps where spring water showed in silver pools the snow settled in patches or clung like puff balls to boughs of cedars and tamaracks.

Presently they came to a filling where a logging road crossed the railway; and here Hub stopped.

"This is it," he said. "Now brace up, Lonnie. It isn't much farther."

Except where it angled to avoid a stump or rock the road ahead ran straight, lying white and undisturbed. Against a snow-clouded horizon of palely lighted sky it seemed to end at a distant rise.

Hub topped the rise and looked across a clearing.

"There's the settler's house," he called. "I see smoke, too. What's the matter?"

LONNIE, behind him, supported himself against a cottonwood tree. Hub swung around and hurried back to him.

"I can't go much farther, Hub. I feel sick. Do you think I can hold a job—if he gives me one?"

"Sure you can hold a job—of light work," Hub answered cheerfully; and thought: *We'll never make it. It's been this way always; and I might as well give in and take it.*

"If you can't," he said, "I can." He dropped his packsack and swung Lonnie to his shoulder; then seized the brace of the packsack in his right hand and started. "It's just it would be better if we both work. On account of getting enough money quicker and getting you to Colorado as soon as we can."

He felt resentment. Lonnie! If it wasn't for Lonnie.

Then he shook these thoughts away, ashamed of them. He was strong and healthy. Any good man should be able to take care of his sick brother—come Hell and high water—and win out for himself, too.

CHAPTER II

CLARA HOBBS dropped her armful of split maple in the woodbox, put wood in the flat-topped kitchen stove, and slammed the lid in place.

"Thank God, we've plenty to burn!" she exclaimed and smiled at the yellow face of a cheap clock on a shelf over the stove. "Gracious! After five."

She was a handsome young woman, perhaps twenty-seven, whose fresh and glowing womanhood had not been deadened by her lonely backwoods life. A plain black dress of loose wool material clung to the curves of her rounded figure. She vibrated with health and energy. Her presence dominated the drab and barren kitchen; and the room reflected a glow of warmth from her.

She bent and brushed snow and sawdust from her full skirt; and this outlined her limbs under the worn cloth. She smoothed the skirt and paused to admire the curves of her legs. A loose darn near the skirt's hem caught her quick eye. She moved to a cluttered table for her scissors and raised her skirt, showing a shorter wool petticoat, knit stockings, and square-toed shoes.

"Tst!" she breathed as she cut frayed edges of the darn.

She put down the scissors, shook her long black curls, and ran her hand into her hair as she straightened. The freshening fire, the quick tosses of her head, her glowing cheeks—all brought cheer to the cheerless space.

She looked around the room; and its depressing barrenness tightened her loneliness.

"Oh, Lord," she sighed; and thought: *Have I got to see nothing but this forever?*

A small boy of about six slammed the back door.

"Ma, Ma, Mother!" he screamed as he burst into the kitchen. "There's two men coming 'long the road. One's carrying the other."

He had a round, freckled face; it glowed with cold and excitement as he stood, mouth open, staring at Clara Hobbs, his chest under a worn blue coat rising and falling as he waited, panting.

Clara Hobbs looked out the front window, her hands cupped around her eyes and against the pane.

"They're coming in here," she whispered more to herself than the boy. "Where's Gramp, Tim? Call him."

She turned from the window; and her face showed lively interest. She smoothed her curls into place with quick hands, adjusted her dress collar, pulled her skirt at her rounded hips.

"Out back of the barn," the boy answered. "Talking to a man. He won't let me come near—"

"One must be hurt," Clara Hobbs said as she looked through the window again. "Call Gramp in. Quick! A man! What man?"

"I dunno. But he swears lots," Tim answered.

He went out the back door, holes showing in his stockings.

HUB stopped a few feet from Hobbs' front door and eased Lonnie to the ground.

"I'll see what they say here," he said and dropped his packsack.

Clara Hobbs opened the door before Hub knocked.

He stood near the single doorstep. "We're looking for Swanson's camps," he said and touched his hat. "He's all in," indicating Lonnie, who sat on the packsack now.

Between their eyes, as Hub moved closer to Clara Hobbs, a spark clicked in the dusk. It died as Clara raised her hand to her hair and shifted her eyes to Lonnie.

"I thought he might be hurt," she said.

An elderly man and Tim came. The man's tousled gray hair showed over Clara's curls as he stooped and peered past her. Tim, his black eyes like his mother's, edged in beside her, clutched her skirt and drew it tightly about her limbs.

"Ask them in, Mother," Tim whispered. "They don't look like tramps."

She pulled him back and straightened her skirt.

"Sh-h! Swanson's is in most a mile. A camp team will be coming through after supper. Won't it, Gramp?"

The old man swung away from the door and mumbled: "Yeah, I reckon." Then louder, in a cracked voice: "But hell's cats, let 'em walk. Gawd amighty, they can walk, can't they?"

He moved with a spryness out of step

with his apparent age. He jerked off his ragged coat and hung it on a hook near the stove. The coat fell to the floor, but he let it be and sat down in a chair close to the stove corner.

Clara Hobbs looked directly at Hub now and smiled. Again the spark.

"Won't you come in?" she asked; and eager welcome sounded in her pleasant voice.

"Why, yes, thank you," Hub said and returned her smile. "For a few minutes while he rests."

Clara Hobbs moved aside in the doorway and held the door.

"We've not very much; but you can share what we have for supper. Such as it is."

Hub and Lonnie went in. Clara turned into her bedroom. Tim stood in the center of the kitchen and gravely inspected Hub and Lonnie with a youngster's unabashed coolness. Lonnie moved over and sat down on a sofa against the front wall. Hub put his packsack on the floor near the front door and dropped his felt hat on it; then looked about him.

This main room of the three room house served as dining room, sitting room, and kitchen. The front door opened directly on a path which led to the road. Two square windows in the side wall gave a view across the clearing and down the road along which Hub and Lonnie had come. A board wall with a doorless opening separated this room from the storeroom and back door.

The remainder of the downstairs consisted of two bedrooms, both small and square. In the rear one, since Albert Hobbs died, the old man slept and snored at night and frequently yawned and yawned daytimes. Clara and Tim used the front bedroom. The bed in the loft where the old man had slept before Albert died was as it had been for two years. Cleats nailed across two frame members made a ladder to the loft.

HUB saw a pitiable collection of furniture. The cluttered oak table near the side windows—used for eating, reading, all table uses—and a few plain kitchen chairs. A worn cloth-covered chair was in the corner by the woodbox. The stove against the storeroom partition, a child's blackboard between the bedroom doors, an old bookcase in the front corner loaded with torn books and whatnot, the sofa Lonnie was using—this was all.

The house was no home. Just a shelter—uninviting, and more so now in gathering darkness of the winter evening. But it was clean; and it seemed homey to Hub after walking since early morning.

Hub turned to the old man in the cloth-covered chair at the stove.

"Snowed hard, hasn't it?" he said and advanced a step or two.

Gramp hitched the collar of his wool shirt up to his prominent Adam's apple and grunted a flat, "Ungh."

"Been cutting much timber in here?" Hub asked.

Gramp champed his teeth and rubbed his unshaven chin and stared at Hub through narrowed, red-rimmed eyes.

"What you want in these parts?"

Hub wondered at the old man's sourness and did not answer.

Tim squared around in front of Lonnie. "My, but your cheeks are red. And you're thin. Ain't you?"

Clara called from her bedroom, "Tim! Be a little gentleman. Light the lamp, Grandpa. It's time to get supper. Tim, you hold your tongue. Go to the spring and get a pail of water."

"I'll go," Lonnie said.

Hub motioned him back on the sofa. "No, I'll go."

He found the water pail in the storeroom. "Come on, Tim," he called.

Tim drew his eyes away from Lonnie and followed Hub.

As the door banged Clara called, "Bring the lamp in here, please, Gramp. I can't see."

The old man lighted a lamp and put it on the table, his lips moving and his hands shaking. Then he sat down in his chair by the stove and openly glared at Lonnie on the couch.

"You kin see good enough," he said in his rasping voice. "Light shines in there fur all you want. Lessen you look in your mirror—now they're here. Heh."

Clara Hobbs came from the bedroom. Her heels clicked on bare boards. She had changed her dress and wore one of dark gray taffeta with a white jabot. Lonnie saw the light reflect from her dark curls and saw spots of color in her cheeks and thought she was beautiful.

"Huh!" Gramp snorted. "What'd you dress up fur?"

Clara gave him a wordy look and picked up the lamp.

Back in the bedroom she asked: "You two looking for work?"

Lonnie sat up. "Yes, we're looking for jobs for the winter. At least to New Year's. We've got to get work. We've been walking, riding freights, looking for work all fall. Things are bad east of here. Everybody's out of work."

"My!" Clara exclaimed. "He's big and—"

SHE came into the kitchen, a neat white apron over her skirt; smiled at Lonnie and put the lamp on the table. The lamp flared up and clouded the chimney. "Tst! This lamp!" She turned it down deftly.

The old man spat viciously at the glow through the stove grate door.

"It's good enough," he growled.

Clara paused in front of him. "I've asked you to stop that," she said in a low voice.

"Don't have to. Heh! You won't git work. Damn Marcus Swanson's full up now. Over a hundred men in there to his camps. Twenty come through last week, lookin' fur work and leavin'. I counted 'em. Mostly tramps. No account."

Lonnie could see this old buzzard exude meanness. His skin must absorb it from inside him so it leaked from every pore with each word he spoke in his cracked voice.

Clara moved quickly about the kitchen. She took a frying pan from a nail on the wall and put it on the stove. Then got potatoes from the storeroom and started to pare them at the table.

"How do you know they won't get work, Granpa?" she asked. "Two men quit this morning. I saw them go by. Both had their turkeys. If they had their turkeys that means they were carrying their things in them and leaving for good."

She looked at Lonnie and gave him a bright and encouraging smile; and he saw her even white teeth.

Gramp cackled: "You'd see 'em." He spat meaningly. "Hell's halfacre! You always see men. You'd see 'em a mile off."

Clara seemed to consider this a moment. Then, pleasantly, she said: "Well, I don't see many men, or women either. And I like people." She pursed her lips, looked at Gramp knowingly; then glanced at Lonnie and added: "Nice people."

"Huh!" Gramp snorted.

Hub and Tim came in, laughing.

"It's getting colder," Hub said. "I suppose we'd better push on. It's pitch dark now."

"Not tonight," Clara said. "Marcus Swanson is always touchy at night. He gets lonesome, too. I know; I've cooked for him. You can stay here. You've better chances for jobs in the morning, if he doesn't think you're just getting supper from him—like tramps."

"That would be fine—" Hub started, but Gramp cut in.

"Stay where? Where in hell be they goin' to sleep? Not with me, by gawd. I won't have no—"

"Why, pshaw, they'll sleep in the loft."

Gramp belched. "Heh! Better fix that broken ladder cleat or they won't get up there."

He was dirty, unshaven; his attitude clashed with Clara Hobbs' welcome and her boy's friendly curiosity.

"I'll fix the ladder." Clara's black eyes flashed. "You too if you don't mind your manners."

HUB laughed. Lonnie sat up and smiled. This was the first time he had seen Hub act like his old self in weeks.

"Why, now," Hub said, "I can fix the ladder."

The old man lighted a clay pipe and kept his eyes on the bowl. Only Hub caught the angry flash from Clara's eyes as she glanced at Gramp.

They ate supper—mainly fried pork, fried apples, and milk potatoes—in silence, save for a few questions, mostly unanswered, from Tim. After supper Gramp put his elbows on the table, picked his teeth, and glared at Hub and Clara.

Hub lighted a cigar and offered one to Gramp, who grunted a refusal. Clara made a face at the old man. She turned to Hub and gave him more of a grin than a smile. Hub's tanned face flushed as he smiled openly at her. The spark clicked across the table.

"Huh!" from Gramp.

"Husband gone?" Lonnie asked.

Clara shook her head. "Un-uh. Dead. Two years now."

"Kind of lonesome—way in here, isn't it?" Hub asked.

"It's terrible!" burst from Clara.

"You got blankets?" Gramp barked.

Lonnie jumped slightly as the rasping voice jarred him out of contemplation of Hub and Clara.

"What do they want blankets for?" Clara asked.

"To sleep under. Swanson don't furnish none. You won't git work with him without you got blankets, lessen you sleep uncovered. Heh! And freeze to death," he added as if the possibility pleased him. "Swanson's tighter with money than the bark on an oak tree."

"Oh!" Clara exclaimed. "He is the most generous man ever lived. Tst!"

"H'ain't neither!"

"They can stay here, if they want to."

Hub thought her pleasant manner and ladylike restraint almost balanced Gramp's obvious hostility.

He turned to Clara. "If we could, that would be fine. We haven't much money, but we've enough to pay you, and we're in need of the work—"

"It isn't much of a walk back and forth. I could get breakfast. I'd like to."

Gramp sneered openly. "You won't git paid at Swanson's regular now no more."

"They've been holding up his company's messengers and stealing—" Clara paused as Gramp interrupted.

"Heh! I wouldn't put it past Swanson himself to have it done—"

"Why, Gramp!" Clara straightened; and Hub saw her eyes flash. "You know better than that. Marcus Swanson is as honest as the day is long. He has plenty of money without—"

"I hain't forgot he fired me."

"You probably needed to be fired." Clara had herself in hand now and spoke in a low tone. "Swanson is one of the fairest men—"

"Didn't neither. It was just because he had too many men; and he never liked me—"

"There's a reward out for the robbers," Lonnie said. "Five hundred dollars for each—"

"Heh! They'll never catch 'em. Swanson'll take care of that."

Gramp got up and fumbled with his pipe; and Hub saw his hands shake.

"Who was that man you were talking to back of the barn before supper?" Clara asked.

GRAMP had moved to the stove; and he fussed with a splinter of wood, poking it through the stove grate. When the splinter was lighted he held it to his pipe, and, puffing, turned around and spoke directly to Clara.

"I've got my business and 'tain't none of yours. I'm looking out for myself. Nobody ever looked out for me any. And I ain't doin' nothin' fur nobody. You don't get no pay effen you do," He started for the back door. "Nope, they'll never catch them robbers."

"Why not?" Clara asked. "Why won't they catch 'em?"

" 'Cause Swanson's in with 'em and don't want 'em caught, mebbe." Gramp jerked around in the storeroom doorway and showed a few yellow teeth. "Mebbe, too, 'twouldn't do his girl no good—"

"What do you mean?" Clara shot at him.

"You and them figger it out while I milk the cow," Gramp cackled in the storeroom. "That big fellow you been sparkin' thinks he's smart. Tell him about it and let him answer yeh."

The back door slammed with a bang.

"Tst!" Clara frowned. "I wonder what he meant. I'll have to apologize for Gramp. He's terrible. Do you suppose—? Could he have meant Daisy Swanson knows who—? Oh, well, Gramp's just queer. I guess he always was, but after Albert died— He was Gramp's only son. Who was that man he was talking to, Tim?"

"Don't know," Tim answered. "But it was a man from Swanson's camps."

Clara said, "Now I'll do the dishes. You two take it easy and rest. You must be tired."

"Not too tired to help," Hub said. "Lonnie is a good dish wiper. I'll fix the ladder while you and he wash the dishes."

Lonnie moved over to the stove and tested the water in the reservoir.

"This is the first time in over a year we've been in a home," he said. "The war sort of knocked us out."

Later the old man came in and went directly to his bedroom. Clara put Tim to bed; and the three talked in whispers by the stove.

LONNIE shifted in the narrow bed in the loft and whispered in Hub's ear: "Do you suppose we'll stay here?"

"I'd like to, if that old rascal wasn't around."

"Would be nice, I think, Hub, to have a

wife like her. Wouldn't it? I think she's pretty, don't you?"

Hub turned on his side; and corn husks beneath him crackled. "Sh-h! She's got Tim—"

"Just the same, she'd like a husband. Like you. I saw it in the way she looked at you when we were eating supper. I'll bet you'll want to marry her before Christmas."

"I've got you to look after. I don't earn enough money for that without trying to support a wife and a boy, too."

Lonnie coughed a few times. "She likes you. Because she knows you're different. If it wasn't for me, you could start from here."

Gramp hawked and yawked; and his bed squeaked.

Hub poked Lonnie with his elbow. "Keep still and go to sleep."

He listened to the maple sputter in the stove below. The house creaked with cold. He saw the light of the fire flicker on the floor below. This new development was something to think about.

If he got work at Swanson's camp tomorrow, he knew Clara Hobbs would be in his and Lonnie's future. *And,* he thought, *this will be so whether we live at Swanson's or here.*

CHAPTER III

AT DAWN a wind came up and blew drifts at the house corners and rattled shakes on the roof as Clara cooked breakfast.

Gramp and Tim were asleep when Hub and Lonnie left for Swanson's.

As Hub topped the last ridge he saw the iron stack of a sawmill pointing up through woods behind a collection of buildings spread out helter-skelter in a clearing. All made a motley picture in the early morning light—three long bunkhouses and a chuckhouse of logs and unplaned, unpainted lumber, several shanties, two log stables, and a post barn. The mouth of a root cellar showed darkly near the low stables at his left; and smoke came from stovepipes and waved over the shaked roofs of the bunkhouses and chuckhouse before him.

Hub said, "If Swanson asks you what's the matter, I'll say your heart is weak. But we won't say anything about your health unless he asks."

They plowed through loose snow and pulled up near a team of black horses before the chuckhouse. A bearded teamster held the reins and a man who wore a gray business suit, a short fur-lined coat, and a black felt hat knelt on packed snow and fussed with the harness.

This man straightened and saw Hub. "Now what?" he snapped in a crisp voice. "Well?"

"I'm looking for the boss," Hub said.

"If you want to find the boss around here, young fellow, you just start something and I'll let you know where he is."

The teamster snorted and started a laugh, but stopped at a scowl from the other.

"Take 'em now, Swede, and water 'em." Flashing gray eyes at Hub: "What do you want?"

Hub saw the man's silver gray hair and mustache, a gold watch chain across his vest, his hands bare in the misty cold. *This is Swanson,* he thought as he sensed the man's air of authority.

"What in hell dew you want? A job or something? I haven't got all day. Fivethutty now. I'm Swanson. What is it you want?"

Hub said, "I was wondering, Mr. Swanson—"

"Stop your wondering. I haven't time to wonder."

Swanson swung around and walked rapidly to the chuckhouse.

"You should have said we want work," Lonnie whispered.

"He didn't give me time." Hub shrugged his heavy shoulders. "You stay out here. I'll get a job yet. He's all right. Just in a hurry."

The Swede teamster in the front end of one of the stables held the end of a breeching stay in his hand and looked over the rump of a gray horse as Hub approached.

Before Hub spoke, the teamster said, "Don't bother me. I ain't doin' the hirin'. Swanson, he's madder'n all hell. Company man here yestidday say payroll holdups all Swanson's fault. Men quit, too. No good, anyway. Ask cook. Then see the ol' man, after he's et. He's better then."

Hub walked to the rear of the chuckhouse. Before he reached the door it opened. A frail little man, with a glistening dark face, who wore a white apron, dove out and shot the water from a dishpan over a snowbank.

"Hey you, cook," Hub called.

The cook spun around; shifted his feet impatiently; and wrinkled his forehead. He grinned impishly at Hub and blinked his black eyes.

"What you want?" he asked.

"Have you any work?"

"Work! Work? Say! My cookee, he left yestidday. No good. Je-est drop ev'rytin' and scoot. Mad, I guess, 'cause work hard. Swanson, he's mad; and pretty near, Billy, I'm mad, too. Billy, I'm busy. Like a dog chasing fox on slippery ice, I'm busy. No time for anytin' 'cept work, cookin'. All a time, je-est work. Yeah, hell's halfacre! Jumpin' Johoshaphat, I got work. Dat's all I have got. Nothin' but work all the time. For what? Not for me. For somebuddy else. For companies. Damn!" He danced into the building and slammed the door.

LAUGHING, Hub went to the nearest bunkhouse and opened its board door. Steaming air, heavy with odors, waved out past him. Men in all stages of attire milled about the low, ceilingless room and sat on long bunks and benches.

"Say!" exclaimed a bearded man near the door. "If here ain't a nudder bum come lookin' fur work. You bring anatin to drink, friend? Eh?"

He swore as he came closer and peered closely at Hub and blew the vile breath of last night's onions in his face.

Hub stepped up and into the room past him; and the man turned and looked him over.

"Yow!" he exclaimed and swore again. "Ol' man'll give you a job, boy, or I'm crazy."

"Think so?" Hub asked.

A man with black hair slicked down above a dark, intense face swung away from a group and snapped broad suspenders over his red flannel shirt as he gazed at Hub. The inspection seemed to please him, for his intense look relaxed.

"What's your name, friend?" he asked.

"Hub Miller."

"Mine's Al Bates. If 'twas me now, I'd sit tight 'til they're all gone to the woods. About seven. Then see the ol' man in his office, polite like; and don't get mad. Just answer his questions. See?"

Hub decided to take his advice. "All right, I will," he said and went out.

Lonnie joined him; and they waited in the doorway of a stable. Men came from the chuckhouse after awhile, smoking and swearing. The Swede teamster appeared, picking his teeth, and backed out his team without saying anything.

Later, in his office, near the kitchen in the chuckhouse, Marcus Swanson turned in his chair and looked from under heavy eyebrows at Hub in the doorway.

"You want a job?" Swanson asked.

"Yes, sir," Hub answered. "I do."

Swanson smoothed his mustache and twisted an end as he ran his eyes up and down Hub.

"What's the matter with your friend? You look like something, but what's wrong with him? He want to work, too?"

Hub rested his hand on the door frame and crowded in to hide Lonnie.

"Just a little heart trouble, sir." He smiled at Swanson. "He is young and small, but he can do light work."

Swanson kicked the board wall near his table. "Hey, you, Billy. Cook!" When Billy's bald pate showed under Hub's arm: "Can you use that little fellow?"

"This thin one? Yes, sure. Sure, I use heem, Marcus. Cookee that left, no good. Too fat. Too lazy. This one can wipe dishes. Billy, I'm cook. Not wipe dishes and set tables, Marcus. I quit soon—no help."

SWANSON pulled at his mustache. "Oh, hell, you've been quitting me for ten years." He pulled his hat down on his forehead and scanned Hub intently. "What's your name, my boy?"

"Hubert Miller, sir."

With a pencil from his vest pocket Swanson initialed the date on a wall calendar over his table.

"His?" He pointed to Lonnie.

"Lonnie Nutting, sir."

"Nutting, eh?" In an undertone: "Nothing—hmm-m." In the crisp tone: "Pays thirty-five a month and found for you. Twenty-five for him; and he helps Sundays. Got your blankets?"

"No, sir," Hub answered.

Swanson snorted. "Hell's angels, man, you can't work here. I don't furnish blankets. The damn men steal 'em."

"We aim to stay with Mrs. Hobbs and eat breakfast there."

"Stay with Mrs. Hobbs? She's a good cook. Fine girl, Clara is. But it's a good thing there're two of you." He chuckled. "The old man'd kill one."

Smothered laughter from the other side of the partition.

"Shut up!" Swanson yelled. "And get to work, you baldheaded little monkey of a cook. The pay's thirty for him and forty for you and two meals each, if you stay at Mrs. Hobbs'.

"You—" indicating Hub—"get an axe from the toolhouse and get out in the woods. See Chuck. He's my foreman. Take orders from him. And you, Skinny, get in there and help Billy."

Hub turned quickly, smiling. *At last we've jobs,* he thought. *Now if we can only hold them.*

"Wait a minute, Miller. Sit down." Swanson indicated a chair near the office door. As Hub took the chair: "Go on, Skinny. Help Billy. Were you in the war, Miller?"

"Yes, sir. Four years."

"Officer?"

"Only second lieutenant."

"Who with?"

"Twenty-fourth Michigan infantry at first. Then cavalry. At the last—army intelligence on special assignment."

"Uh-huh. Thought so," Swanson said. He sat straighter. "Eh? Army intelligence? My company at Council Bluffs didn't send you out here, did they?"

"No, sir. I never heard of your company."

Swanson seemed to accept the answer as true.

"Hmmm-m," he mused. "Where'd you come from?"

"WE CAME from Michigan—into Chicago from Muskegon, Michigan on a lumber freighter, looking for work. Then Des Moines; and the C. and N. to Council Bluffs. We walked to Sioux City. Yesterday we walked out here. We stayed last night at Hobbs'; he was pretty tired. I've got to earn money." He smiled thinly. "Lots of it."

"What's the matter with him? Do you know?"

Hub looked directly at Swanson. "Yes, sir, I know. Do I have to tell you?"

Swanson shook his head. "No, I'll pass it."

He made faces with his mustache while he studied Hub.

Presently he said, "They've been holding up company agents all around here this fall. Got me for one payroll; part of another. Wounded one driver. He may die. My men want money, not checks or orders. Company man talked as if 'twas my fault we lost the last one. Well—" He raised his hand in a gesture of dismissal. "Better get to work."

Hub stood up. *He's got more he's wanting to say,* he thought. *He likes me, but isn't quite sure of me.*

"Didn't know but what you might be a detective, or a company spy," Swanson said as he turned to his table. "Go on. Get out in the woods."

Billy, the cook, worked with quiet speed and made every move count. He said little; directed Lonnie with a nod of his head or a wave of his hand. He sliced bread and meat on a clean board; then packed cups and spoons in gunny sacks and sandwiches in baskets, counting to himself.

"Lunch at ten in the woods," he said to Lonnie. "Ol' man, Swanson, he feeds good. Good fella, Marcus is."

He took a can from a cupboard, plunged it into a hundred-pound bag of coffee on the floor, threw coffee beans into a grinder on the wall, and ground like fury, humming to himself.

At twelve o'clock dinner was ready and the tables set.

Lonnie was tired and sat down on a bench. Billy washed his hands; then poised a long fork over his head as one would a baton and sang:

"Oh, she stand right there,
"In the moonlight bare,
"And the moon, she shine tru her nightie.
"A moonbeam lit——"

"Don't you know any good songs?" Lonnie interrupted.

The cook's face lost its rapt look. "Good songs! That's a good song. I learn it when I cook for Swanson on the U. P. job."

He started *John Brown's Body,* singing louder.

Pounding in the office. "Shut up, you Sioux squaw! Get to work!"

BILLY grinned at Lonnie and whispered: "Ol' man touchy as all get out. Had big time yestiddy with company man. Gee-ez-us, how Swanson, he swear. He tell company fella next time Swanson, he bring money out hisself. Swanson say nobody know money coming out last time. Only Swanson and Daisy. Daisy, that's Swanson's girl. Umm-m—"

Billy paused and hugged himself. "She's a peach. She come out here couple times last fall. Men all crazy 'bout her. Company tell her when money come out. That's all I know 'cept—"

He pointed his finger at Lonnie. " 'Cept company . . .

"Oh-h-h! Don't ferget his cheese. I never ferget his cheese. Only once. That time he pretty near kill me. He hellofagood fella, though, boss is."

Billy took a package from a window sill and placed it at the head of a table by the only armchair.

"An' his napkin, too. Boss feel bad 'cause they lose that money. He'd like to get his hands on ones stole it."

"Who do you think stole it?" Lonnie asked.

"Don't ask me. Road agents from Dakota, maybe. Woods are full of 'em this fall. They duck in here from the Territories and duck back over the river again."

Billy grinned at Lonnie. "It wasn't me. All I do is work. For what? No time, no fun, just work—"

"How would road agents know when the money is coming in here?" Lonnie asked.

"That's it. Don't know, lessen somebody tells somebody. An' nobody 'cept Swanson, company, an' Daisy know. Someone tell 'em. Who? That's what company man ask Swanson yestidday and Swanson get made about. He damn near kill company man. Because maybe company say like Swanson or Daisy tip 'em off. Don't care about hisself, boss don't. But his girl! He kill anybody say anytin' about her. She got friends. Maybe she talk like women do. Christopher! It's after—"

He darted outside and left the back door open. With a piece of cordwood he hit a circular mill saw which hung from the eaves a clatter of rapid blows. A tremendous *whang-g-g* reverberated across the clearing. Trees and hills sent the thunder back. As the last clanging ceased, Billy gave three howls. Cliffs near the Hobbs clearing echoed the howls.

Billy bawled: "I yu-ah wa-awnt what I got, come get it, and ta-a-a ke it a-wa-ay, y, y."

Back from cliffs clearly in cold air came: *"Ta-a-ake it a-wa-ay,y,y."*

"That rock back a Hobbs' house, she make a good drum," Billy observed as he came in and shut the door. "Hellishin' high. Fella jump off once. Busted ev'ry bone he's got."

"What did he jump off for?" Lonnie asked.

Billy shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Maybe he work too much for nothin', like me."

AFTER a long afternoon and evening of work Lonnie was through for the day, so tired he could hardly walk to Hobbs' with Hub.

The moon was up when they reached the clearing and turned in past the log barn.

Hub saw Clara tugging at an axe stuck in a chunk of maple at a woodpile near the house; and went to help her.

He jerked the axe loose and swung it down. As the blade hit the wood, he flipped his wrists so the axe did not wedge into the grain but hit the block a glancing blow and drove it apart.

"That's the way to split wood," he said.

"You both got work?"

"Yes."

"I'm glad."

Hub thought to ask her why, but changed his mind and gathered an armful of wood and followed her into the house. The old man, smoking his pipe by the stove, glared at him as he dropped the wood in the woodbox.

"We're able to pay you for bed and breakfast," Hub said. "Swanson will allow us each five dollars more because of it. How is six dollars a month?"

Clara sat down on the sofa beside Lonnie. "Six dollars! Do you mean for each of you?"

"Yes. We won't be here long, you know."

" 'Tain't 'nuff," Gramp rasped.

"Keep still!" Clara shot at him. To Hub: "I wish you'd try and stay longer. Can't you? Until spring anyway."

Hub smiled crookedly. "Well, I wish we could, too. But we can't."

"Heh! You can't leave soon enough to suit me," Gramp said and spat at the stove.

"Stop that!" Clara exclaimed.

"Don't have to," Gramp mumbled.

"I mean about the taxes," Clara said,

blushing. "Money like that helps, you know."

Hub reached in his pocket. "I'll give you one month's money now, if you want it."

"No-o, I don't need it now, unless I walk in to the village tomorrow and get supplies."

"Take it!" Gramp barked. "Take it when you kin git it."

"To the village! Walk in!" from Lonnie. "It must be nearly ten miles."

"Not to go through the timber." Clara tossed her head. "I've walked it lots. Tim walks there for school, when he goes."

"I could help teach him," Lonnie said.

Hub put twelve one dollar bills on the table. "Lonnie has studied more than I have."

The old man reached for the money.

"Careful there, Grandpa," Hub cautioned.

Clara jumped up and tucked the money in the waist of her dress. "Behave yourself, Gramp."

"This is my place."

"It is not!" As she said it Clara's teeth closed down over her lip. "Go in your room."

"Don't have to. Them two—Him!" Gramp glared at Hub. "They kin git out." He shuffled past the stove. "I don't want 'em around."

GRAMP walked briskly to the back door and went out."

"Tst!" Clara exclaimed. "He never was very pleasant. But he has been acting strange all fall. I wonder what it is. Tim, you can go in and get ready for bed, yourself."

"It's cold in there alone, Mother. You come too."

Clara looked at Hub. "Let's sit up awhile. Should we? And talk?"

Lonnie went in the storeroom, and Clara said, "I put a cup beside the pail for you."

As Lonnie came back, Hub started to unlace his shoe pacs.

Watching him, Clara whispered, "Do you have to go to bed now?"

"We'd better, I guess. But I won't sleep for awhile."

"Why?" Her black eyes, dancing, searched his brown ones. "Why, Hub?"

"Because of your father-in-law."

"Oh! Well, pshaw, you don't need to be afraid of him."

"I'm not afraid of him. But I'm not going to sleep until I hear him snoring."

CHAPTER IV

SWANSON'S logging operations covered half the township north of the camps. He took all the timber large enough for railroad ties—cottonwood, oak, ash, walnut, and the few pines. Small trees were chopped down; sawyers expertly dropped the large ones where Chuck, the woods foreman, directed.

The work was hard, but the men worked cheerfully—laughing, swearing, chewing tobacco or smoking—often with bare hands, hatless, and in their shirt sleeves.

Hub had been shifted to sawing. Swinging on the long crosscut saw, his back bent, was wearing. Friday night he was tired as he waited for Lonnie. He sat at a board table near the front of the bunkhouse. At the end of the table, his feet on it, lounged a teamster, Bart Sweeney—a muscular, quick-moving individual.

Sweeney had a sharp face, which reminded Hub of a hatchet, and small brown eyes set so closely together they nearly touched his long nose. Although the room was warm, Sweeney wore his woods coat, the collar of which he had turned up as a cushion for his head on the top rail of his chair.

The black-haired, intense-looking Al Bates who had given Hub advice his first morning at Swanson's sat on a bench near Hub.

"Want to play cards?" Bates asked.

Hub shook his head. "No, I guess not."

"He's got to go soon as that weak-hearted partner of his is through," Bart Sweeney said and snickered. "How's he going to manage to walk to Hobbs' ev'ry night?"

"I'll take care of him," Hub said.

And he felt his anger rise. Why did he have to take this drifter's insults. If the fellow went too far it would be a pleasure to lick him.

"Don't let Bart rile you," Al Bates drawled. "He never means what he says."

"I say what I mean, Bates." Sweeney moved his feet from the table. "And don't either of you forget I can back it up."

Al Bates leaned forward under the hanging lamp over the table and winked at Hub. "Look out for Mrs. Hobbs' father-in-law. He's a mean old cuss."

"I'll watch out," Hub said quietly.

"You ain't afraid he'll—?"

"I'm not afraid of anybody. But I'm not picking fights."

"Huh!" Sweeney snorted. "You ain't. You'd better look out for Clara Hobbs, though."

Hub gave him a quick look and saw much he did not like about the sharp and shifty eyes.

"What's the matter with Mrs. Hobbs, friend?" he asked.

"Going in to the village or town tomorrow night," Bates cut in quickly. "We never spend much, except when we got our pay. We just go to Jipp Grinsted's or some other joint." Seeing Hub shake his head: "You saving for something? You can't do it. Look at me now—ever since the war in lumber camps and tie camps; and I'm broke. Only way you can save is to send it home to your wife or to your father and mother."

Hub smiled thinly. "I don't happen to have any of those."

"You don't? Ain't you two partners got nobody? How that come?"

"Oh, Hub sighed, "the war, I guess."

"What you want to save for then?"

"We want to go to California. Out there it's warm."

Sweeney snickered. "The cold here bothers tenderfeet—"

"Better come along," Bates interrupted. "We can go in to Sioux City, if you want. You won't get to California anyway. Spending'll get you."

"Huh!" from Sweeney. "He don't need to go to town. He's got the Hobbs woman. She's better'n anything in town—"

"That's enough!" Hub jumped to his feet as he said it and seized the collar of Sweeney's coat and the top rail of his chair. With Sweeney squirming in the chair, he dragged it to the front door.

"Fight!" a man yelled.

HUB swung the door open and jerked Sweeney from the chair.

Sweeney let go with a swift pass, but Hub caught his arm and shoved him to the doorway; then jammed his foot into Sweeney's middle and pushed him out. Sweeney lost his balance, slipped, went down on his back and slid on ice and packed snow.

Hub saw the advantage in having the light back of him and made it plain as he stepped outside that he intended to keep the advantage.

"I'll kill you for that," Sweeney grunted as he got to his feet and men formed a half circle in front of the bunkhouse.

Al Bates edged behind Hub and whispered: "Look out for him, Miller. He's mean, and he's got a gun in his vest pocket."

"Shut up!" from one of the widening ring of men. "Let 'em fight. Best man wins."

As Hub advanced a step, Sweeney came in to force the fight. Sweeney swung his right fist. The blow grazed Hub's ear; and he slipped as he dodged and turned.

Now Sweeney rushed him; and Hub knew he would jump on him. Hub pushed to his knees but saw no time to get to his feet. As Sweeney aimed a kick for his head, Hub dove for Sweeney's leg and caught it. Sweeney went down on his back; and Hub saw his head bob from the bump it got. Sweeney sprang up, thoroughly mad now; and Hub waited as the older man circled, his right arm swinging and his left up.

Sweeney rushed now and got in a blow that caught Hub in the chest and made him grunt.

This has got to end quickly, Hub thought as he swung to meet another rush. This time Sweeney came in bent over, head down. Hub dodged and stepped back and tried an uppercut but missed. As Sweeney swung around, Hub slipped and went down on his knees. Sweeney charged to pin him down, buh Hub was too quick. He scrambled up; and, he straightened, lifted his right fist from his knee in a blow that had all the weight and strength he could give it.

The swing was timed in luck. It caught the charging Sweeney squarely on the chin. A crack like the thwack of a shingle on the rump of a horse; and the fight was over.

Sweeney wobbled, grinned with bewilderment; and Hub saw his tobacco-stained teeth. He let go with a vicious short jab at the yellow teeth; and Sweeney went down, completely out.

Hub went in the bunkhouse. Men followed him and slapped his back.

One said: "Wow, friend, what a wallop."

"Dot Bart Sweeney, he vill not talk so much for awhile yet," rumbled a big German whose blue eyes smiled at Hub over red cheeks. "Gott in himmel, boy, I would not like for you to punch me."

AL BATES said, "Listen, Miller, you licked him good; and he had it coming, but look out for him. He'll shoot you for that, if he gets a chance."

"Who is he?" Hub asked.

Bates shook his head. "Don't know. He started here early fall; then quit for a few days, but came back; and the boss took him on. He never had much to do with anybody."

Presently Lonnie came in. "I heard you had a fight. Did you?"

Hub did not answer. He got his coat; and they went outside. Hub looked for Sweeney but did not see him.

Hub said, "That fellow Sweeney said something about you and me and Clara Hobbs which made me mad. I don't like him anyway."

"Will Swanson fire us?" Lonnie asked, anxiety in his voice.

"I hope not," Hub answered. "I want to stay here."

"On account of Clara?"

"On account of you," Hub answered, and knew the answer was not wholly true.

As they took the road and started up the hill Lonnie said, "The cook says Swanson is the best fellow ever lived. If Swanson says anything, you better tell him just how things are."

"Al Bates will back me up. Stop worrying."

When they reached the house Tim had gone to bed. Clara was reading a newspaper she had brought from the village. Gramp sat in his corner by the stove, staring at the glowing grate.

Hub washed his hands in the storeroom and wrapped his right hand in a handkerchief to cover cuts on the knuckles made by Sweeney's teeth.

"What's the matter?" Clara asked.

"Nothing," Hub answered. "Just hurt my hand."

"There'll be a big dance in Sioux City Christmas Eve," Clara announced. "Let's go. Gramp can stay with Tim; and I can get a girl in town for Lonnie."

"You ain't got no business—" Gramp started.

"Lonnie can't go," Hub said.

"But you and Clara can," Lonnie said. "I'll stay here."

Hub smiled crookedly. "I've no clothes except these."

"Heh! Then you can't go," Gramp cackled.

Clara stood up. "You could wear one of Albert's shirts and his suit. He got a new one just before he died. We were going to move to town."

"He can't have it!" Gramp snapped.

Clara went in her bedroom and returned with a dark blue suit and a white shirt.

Gramp stood up. "No!"

"Why not? What have you got to say—?"

"Place and his things are mine. That fella can't—"

CLARA put the clothing on the table. "This place is not yours. It was Albert's and mine. Now it's mine and Tim's."

"Urr-ah!" Gramp sat down.

Excitedly Clara said, "Take off your coat, Hub."

Hub shucked out of his coat, and Clara held up Albert's shirt. Evidently Albert had been a sizeable man, for the shirt and suit would do.

"I can fix 'em. And he had shoes and socks. I haven't been to a dance in over two years. You will go, Hub? Please. Don't you want to?"

Hub saw pleading in her eyes. "Yes, I'll go—if we're here then."

"You'll just have to be here." She fussed with the clothes. "Today was the first I've been to the village in three weeks. I got all the food I could carry with that money you paid me. We're going to have beef for a change. I'm tired of pork and deer meat."

"Deer meat's good enough," Gramp grumbled.

"Did you walk all the way?" Lonnie asked.

"I walked in through the timber this morning. On the way back I got a ride with a farmer to the corners and came down the tracks. I don't mind walking or working. I've walked to Sioux City and back. It's the lonesomeness gets me, especially in the evening. Before you came I thought I'd go crazy."

Gramp squared his chair, stood up, and went in the storeroom. Hub heard him light the lantern and bang the back door.

After they went to bed Hub waited until he thought Lonnie and Clara were asleep and then put on his trousers and wool shirt. He pulled his packsack from under the bed and found the Colt he had carried the last year of the war and six grease-coated cartridges. He swung the gun's cylinder out and slipped in the loads. All this in darkness; and he took his time about it.

Downstairs he put on his shoepacs and coat in dim light from the fire and slipped out the front door. A full moon, round and orange, smiled over timber in the southwest and made shadows of the square house and a walnut tree near the woodpile. A rabbit scurried from bushes at the house corner and dove into the woodpile as Hub headed for the barn, which stood about sixty feet from the house.

He saw light at the end window and went to the window. Through cobwebs and grime on the small pane he saw the cow in her stall. He heard voices in guarded talk. The lantern light wavered over log beams and walls and the straw-covered floor; and now he saw a man's shoulder come into view. Next Gramp's tousled gray head as it shifted past the window; and Hub heard the old man's cracked voice rise in louder tones: "I'll bring it out tomorrow when they're gone . . . Put it right up there."

THE rest of the talk became a mumble as Gramp and his companion moved on toward the barn door. Hub ducked back and crossed to the woodpile. From there he saw the barn door open and two men come out. The one carrying the lantern was Gramp, but the light hugged the ground and showed nothing of the other except his legs.

Hub walked to the front door of the house. As he stepped inside he saw Clara, wearing a white nightgown, in her bedroom doorway.

"What's the trouble?" she whispered.

"No trouble. The old man is out in back, talking to someone. I don't know who. Gramp will be coming in now. I'll have to get back in bed."

"But your gun? What's that for?"

"I took it because I didn't know what he's up to. He's mad at me for some reason—"

"Sh-h!" Clara cautioned. "He's coming now. Quick! Get in here."

Hub edged into the bedroom beside her and heard the old man come in and fuss with the lantern in the storeroom and then move into his bedroom.

"I'll have to wait until he's asleep," Hub whispered and knew Clara moved closer to him.

He felt the warmth of her now; and he smelled the clean odor of her hair. She put her hand on his arm and rested her head on his shoulder. Strange currents ran through him; and he knew an inclination to put his arm around her, but curbed the inclination. There should be a time and place for everything. With Lonnie to look after he had no time and there was no place in his scheme of things for what he might like to do.

Presently they heard Gramp snore.

Clara looked up; and Hub saw her parted lips and shining eyes in the faint light.

"He went to sleep too soon, Hub," she whispered.

"Yes," he said. "Well, good night, Clara. I've always taken care of myself. I guess I can take care of the rest of us, too."

"I wonder, does that include me, Hub?"

"I hope so, Clara."

In the loft he put his gun under his pillow, took off his pacs, trousers, and coat, and got into bed.

"What was it?" Lonnie whispered.

"I don't know. The old man met someone out in the barn. I think someone who left something here for him to keep."

CHAPTER V

THE next day, Saturday, was a hard day for Lonnie. The cook pushed him through kitchen tasks—peeling potatoes, setting the tables, wiping dishes, getting water to fill the tank. Lonnie stifled a spasm of coughing and went outdoors.

Billy followed and said, "Say, Holy Mother! You've got consumption."

"No, just heart trouble."

"Don't let Swanson know if you've got consumption. Men would quit if they just think you've got consumption. They're awful 'fraid." He peered intently at Lonnie. "What's the matter? You think all the time?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Sperk up!" Billy smiled encouragingly.

"Tomorrow there won't be many here to eat. We'll take it easy. What you worry about?" When Lonnie did not answer. "Maybe you got a girl, eh?"

"No, not me."

At four o'clock Swanson told the cook to call in the men. "They'll be getting uneasy anyway. Won't work much now; and they'll want to get ready to go to town very soon."

Billy mumbled to Lonnie: "Ol' man must be getting weak. I'll bet he docks 'em, though. Now we've got to hurry and get done quick after supper. You goin' to town?"

He looked closely at Lonnie. "You sit down and rest awhile. I'll hustle around."

"I'm all right," Lonnie said.

The cook whistled a tune; then struck a pose, raised his fork as if about to sing, but caught himself.

"Lonnie, fellas like us work in woods for companies are just big fools."

"How so?"

"Work all the time for what? For companies. Take a fella like a farmer—he's got work all the time, too. But he's got something else. A home. And a wife and children. Something to work for. I've got nothing but my ol' mudder in Canada. No chance for me to get a wife. No woman want me now, anyway. What the hell my time and my work good for?"

Billy paused; then, a faraway expression on his oily face, said: "Um-m-m, be nice, eh, have a home and a wife. Sit down after work at home?"

Lonnie caught the note of sadness in the cook's voice and sighed: "You bet. A home!"

Billy's face lighted. Then he shook out of his dreaming. "Oh, geez! Here they come. Hustle up! We got to get supper on the table."

Their first week was ended. On the way to Hobbs' Hub said to Lonnie, "I'll take your place in the morning if you want me to."

"They'd wonder why. The cook's watching now."

When they reached the house, Clara had a roaring fire in the stove and giving Tim a bath in a washtub.

Hub knelt on the floor beside the tub. "Let me help you; I'll soap him; and you can scrub."

They talked and laughed, heads close over the tub, Tim between them. Gramp glared and rumbled in his corner. Lonnie rested on the couch. When the bath was over, Hub held Tim on his lap and rubbed him with a towel.

Clara warmed the boy's nightgown at the stove. "Grandpa," she said, "did you milk the cow?"

Gramp stopped glaring at Hub and spat on the stove grate.

"Unh-unh, don't want to now. I will later," he grunted.

"I'll milk her," Hub said on his way to the bedroom with Tim.

He put the boy in bed, went in the storeroom, lighted the lantern, took the milk pail, and went out.

He opened the door of the cottage, started to walk toward the barn. That funny feeling that haunted him about Gramp still clung to him. No matter how he tried to figure it, there was something fishy about the whole thing. The old man had something in back of him that he had said nothing to Clara about.

Hub tried to expunge the thought from his mind but it persisted in annoying him. In spite of Gramp's gruffness—perhaps because of it, Hub knew something was not right. He'd get to its roots all right.

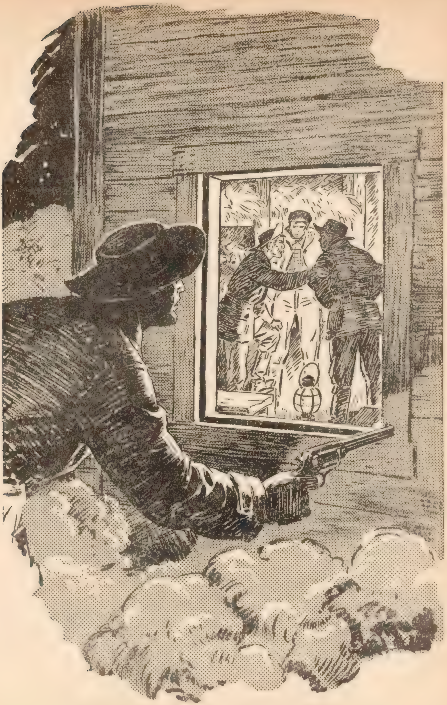
THIS small, low building of oak logs had a board door, an earth floor covered straw, and a window at each end. Hub hung the lantern on a post near the cow's stall. He went to the end of the barn near the window where he had seen Gramp the night before. Hurriedly now, he ran his hand along the top log. Near the corner he found a small, but fairly heavy, canvas bag; and he put this in his pocket. When Gramp opened the barn door Hub was milking the cow.

In the house Lonnie said to Clara, "Hub's crazy about Tim, too."

Clara blushed as she took a work basket from a shelf and sat down at the table. Lonnie watched her adjust a darning gourd under a hole in one of Tim's stockings and expertly darn the hole, her darning needle flying back and forth.

She had a wide forehead and a firm chin. Character showed in her face. She was not beautiful but she was attractive. Her features were fine, her complexion was clear; she had full red lips.

He saw pleasant thoughts show on her



Gramps was engaged in an animated conversation with two men face behind lowered lids; and he remembered Billy's talk of that afternoon. He thought of these things for awhile as he watched Clara's pretty face. She would make a good wife for Hub.

Now he heard someone trying to open the back door. "Who's that?" he asked, and sat up on the sofa.

"Probably Gramp," Clara answered without taking her eyes from her work.

Lonnie got up as the back door opened.

"It's Hub," he said, "and he's got Gramp."

Hub came in, carrying Gramp; and the old man's head hung down.

"What's the matter?" Lonnie cried.

Clara put her darning in the work basket and the basket on the table.

Hub kicked open the door to Gramp's bedroom, sidled in, and put Gramp on the bed.

Clara took the lamp from the table and peered past Lonnie as he stood in the bedroom doorway.

"He's dead," Hub said.

"Dead!" Lonnie exclaimed. "For gawd's sake!"

"I killed him."

"You killed him!" Clara and Lonnie exclaimed together.

"He came at me with a pitchfork. I had to hit him. I've known he would be after me. I didn't hit him hard. But he stumbled and banged his head on the barn wall. Then he got up and didn't say a word. He went outside; and I saw him fall down and hit his head again on a bare place near the barn."

LONNIE felt of Gramp's chest. "He isn't dead; his heart's going. Not very strong, though. We ought to get a doctor."

"No," Clara said. "He should be dead." She moved back to the table and put the lamp on it. "Oh, I don't mean that. Gramp isn't so bad. It's just he's old and cranky. Leave him alone. He's always falling down."

Lonnie pulled the bed's top blanket from under Gramp and put it over him.

"We mustn't disturb him. I read that if a man hits his head, he shouldn't be moved at all. Let's go to bed now. Should we? I'm scared Hub."

"Don't be," Hub said. "I suppose, though, if he dies, they won't believe he just died. I'll have to tell how it was. But nobody saw it and they won't—"

"I'll say I saw it," Clara said in a low tone. "Don't worry about him."

Lonnie scampered up the ladder. "Gawd!" he called down. "I hope he don't die. We've had enough trouble."

Clara and Hub sat down near the table. Hub found one of Tim's pencils and figured on the border of the newspaper Clara had brought from town.

"What are you doing, Hub?" Clara asked.

"Figuring how much we'll have."

"Why?"

"We want to go to California."

Clara reached over and put her hand in his. "I know what you're planning," she whispered. "You're trying to get out in the mountains. To Colorado Territory where the air is dry. I've heard you talking. He's got consumption. I knew it when you first came."

"Are you afraid you'll catch it?" Hub asked. "He's careful."

"No." Clara laughed softly. "I've boiled his dishes from the first."

"I saw that."

"But won't you catch it—sleeping with him."

"Me?" Hub grinned. "I won't catch anything."

Tim tossed in bed and muttered in his sleep. Clara went to the bedroom doorway. Hub put wood in the stove and poured a pail of water into the reservoir.

As he reached down and unlaced his shoepacs he saw Clara watching him from her doorway.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I'm going to bed."

"Oh," she said, and he caught the note of disappointment in her voice.

HUB got up before daylight. As he was putting wood in the stove Clara came to her bedroom doorway. The lamplight dulled against streaks of dawn through the kitchen windows; and he saw she had on her black wool dress.

"Have you looked at him?" Clara whispered.

Hub's eyes met hers, and he nodded. "He's dead. Died in the night."

"Are you sure?"

"I've been in and looked at him. He's stiffer than a board. And cold. Deader 'n a doornail."

Lonnie came down the ladder. "Now what're we going to do? They'll find out you killed him."

"They won't either!" Clara snapped. "Everybody knows he was always falling down and having trouble with his heart. He was due to die anyway. We can say he fell. That's the truth, too." She came into the kitchen, wearing a short black coat.

"What're you going to do?" Hub asked.

Clara got overshoes and gaiters she kept back of the stove. "I'm going to see Marcus Swanson and borrow a team and bobsled. It's Sunday. They won't need 'em. We've got to get him in town to the undertaker's."

"I'll get the team," Hub said. "Lonnie, you stay here. It'll be all right. I'll tell the cook. Al Bates will help him, if he's sober. I loaned him two dollars last night."

He went out the back door. Clara started breakfast. Lonnie coughed and went to the back door.

"Do you feel sick?" Clara asked as he came back.

He didn't answer, but sat down beside the table; and she bent down and looked at his face.

"It's nothing," he answered, "except I didn't sleep. I get worse when I worry." He gave her a quick look. "Hub was up?"

"He got up when Gramp died. I heard him. What are you worrying about?"

"Oh-h, about him—the old man, and everything."

"Don't worry about Gramp." She sliced potatoes into the frying pan on the stove. "No one will think anything of it."

Lonnie drummed with his fingers on the table.

"Do you like Hub?" he finally asked.

"Like him! I'm crazy about him."

Lonnie dropped his head to his arm on the table. "He likes you, too. I know. He'd marry you if it wasn't—"

"I'd go with him anywhere any time he asked me, if it weren't for—"

"He wants to have a home and—"

"He could marry me and we could live here until—" She caught herself.

"Do you really love him, Clara?"

"I'd love him even if he beat me every day."

Lonnie thumbed the newspaper on the table. "He wouldn't do that."

Daylight had come. Clara blew out the lamp.

"Kerosene is almost gone," she apologized.

HUB found Swanson in the chuckhouse, eating breakfast alone.

"What do you want?" Swanson managed through a mouthful. "Going to quit? You haven't been here a week."

"Mrs. Hobbs wants to borrow a team and a bobsled."

Swanson stopped his fork, carrying a piece of fried ham, halfway to his mouth. Fork poised and his mouth open, he stared at Hub.

"More coffee!" Swanson yelled. "Had your breakfast, Miller? Sit down and eat."

"No, thank you," Hub said. "I expect to have breakfast back there."

The cook came and filled Swanson's cup. Hub shook his head as he caught Billy's look of inquiry; and Billy nodded.

"Well, I'll be damned." Swanson poured coffee into a saucer and sipped it. "So Mrs. Hobbs wants to borrow a team and sled. Isn't that fine? What does she want to do with it—take you for a ride or to church?"

"The old man is dead."

"The hell he is." Swanson bit off the end of a cigar and spat the end on the floor. "Hmm-m," he mused past the cigar while he lighted it. "Time he died—the old geezer. What'd you do to your hand, young fellow?"

Hub glanced at the court plaster Clara had put across his knuckles after Tim's bath. "Had a little fight the other night."

"Heard you did. Licked your man, too. I fired him that night. No good. What'd the old toad die of? You didn't hit him, too, did you?"

Hub caught Swanson's eye. "I'd like that between you and me, sir. And there's something else." He inclined his head toward the office. "She wants to take him in town to the undertaker's"

Swanson swung from his chair and headed for the office.

"I should think she would. I wouldn't want him around, dead or alive. Well, I'm not running a funeral hack livery, you know." At the office door he yelled: "Hey, you, cook!"

Billy came running. "Yes, Marcus. Yes, sir."

"Go tell Swede I said to get a small bobsled ready for this man. He's going to town with a corpse and a woman."

As the cook went out the chuckhouse

door, a look of surprise on his face, Swanson said, "Come in here, Miller,"

Hub went in the office and shut the door. He took the canvas bag he had found in Hobbs' barn from his pocket and put it on Swanson's table; and the contents faintly clinked as he did so.

"What's that?" Swanson asked.

"I don't know. I haven't opened it. I think it's money; and I'm wondering if it isn't part of your payrolls."

SWANSON untied the bag tape and dumped the contents on the table.

"It's money, all right," he said and spread out wads of banknotes and stacks of coins wrapped in paper.

He broke open a roll of coins and jingled a handful of gold eagles. "It's payroll money. Some of that paper came from the Railroad National Bank in Council Bluffs." He sat down and pushed his hat back on his head. "Why didn't you keep it?"

"I wasn't brought up that way."

"Humpf! You weren't. Where'd you find it?"

Hub told him of Gramp's meeting with a man in Hobbs' barn; and he told him, too, of finding the bag last night.

"Then the old man came at me with a pitchfork. I had to hit him. That didn't kill him, but he hit his head and fell down again later. He died about two o'clock last night."

"You got any idea who this other man was?" Swanson asked. "If I knew that we might get a clue to the gang that's behind him."

"It could have been somebody working here," Hub said.

"Sweeney?"

"Possibly."

Swanson put the banknotes and coins in the bag. He unlocked a castiron safe which stood near the office door, opened a drawer in the safe and tossed the bag in.

"Thanks, Miller," he said. "I'll let this thing cool and see what happens." He opened the office door. "Your team and bobsled ought to be ready now."

Hub stood up and saw Swanson give him a keen look which carried approval and friendliness. *He thinks the same as I do,* he thought as he walked out to the barn. *And he's my kind of a man."*

Back at Hobbs' he let the big horses stand near the barn and carried out armfuls of hay and threw the hay in the sled box. In the house, he wrapped Gramp in a blanket, carried him out and put him in the bobsled.

Clara told Lonnie she and Hub would be back before dark.

"When Tim wakes up tell him we took Gramp to the hospital. We'll tell him kind of easy. After all Gramp was Tim's father's dad, you know." To Hub she said: "We'll eat something; then we'll go."

"Won't you have to stay in town?" Hub asked. "For the funeral?"

"There won't be a funeral. Just a burying tomorrow or Tuesday; and I've been to my last burying for awhile. They make me blue. He's got a stepdaughter in town. Let them look after him now—

"Oh, my Lord!" she exclaimed. "Go out and look in his clothes. He's got a lot of money somewhere. I saw him counting it once. He never spent any."

ALL three ran out to the bobsled; and Hub felt under the blanket.

"Maybe he sewed it inside his clothes," Clara said.

Hub shook his head. "There's nothing in his pockets except his pipe and a case knife."

"Then it's in his mattress. I know he's got it somewhere for he never gave me a cent or spent any."

They went in the house; and Clara found the money in the mattress of Gramp's bed —a roll of banknotes and greenbacks bound with a deerskin thong.

Clara rushed to the kitchen table and counted the money. "Three hundred and ninety dollars!" she gasped.

"What a raft of money!" Lonnie exclaimed, his eyes wide.

"When was it you saw the old man counting this money?" Hub asked Clara.

"This fall. Why? You're thinking it might have been after the payrolls were held up?"

"That's what I had in mind."

"I don't know," Clara said thoughtfully. "I can't believe Gramp was in those. Still, he might have been. I think he saved some of this from fur he and Albert trapped."

She picked up a few notes. "I took care of Gramp for over six years. He never helped us. I'm going to take forty dollars and buy a new stove and another lamp. The undertaker will charge about a hundred dollars. That will leave—"

"Two hundred and fifty dollars," Lonnie finished for her. "If you keep forty and the undertaker charges a hundred."

"I'm going to take a hundred and forty. I'll buy a stove, and a lamp—and a new dress, and Tim some clothes, and pay the taxes. Here, take this—" She hurriedly counted and handed money to Hub. "We'll give that to the folks in town. They can pay the undertaker and keep the rest. This, I'll—Here, Lonnie, put it in that pitcher on the shelf."

She smiled up at Hub. "Come on, let's eat something and get this over with."

After Hub and Clara left, Lonnie sat by the kitchen window and moodily gazed at brush and saplings across the clearing. Tim got up and ate his breakfast. They washed the dishes and put them in Clara's cupboard. Then Lonnie sat by the stove and answered the boy's questions briefly.

Tim became uneasy. "If you won't play with me or talk, let's go look at where there's a bear holes up ev'ry year."

The day was clear. From the cliff top Lonnie saw across the spread of the valley and caught the glint of ice on the Big Sioux River where Swanson's men were cutting timber. Far to the east he saw lines of hills and trees marking the course of the Floyd River. Swanson's camp buildings showed plainly; and far below him he saw the snow-covered rocks which time had broken loose from the cliff.

CHAPTER VI

THE day before Christmas came. For a week Hub had seen Lonnie grow pensive and morose. When alone with Hub the boy brightened. But evenings, while Clara and Hub talked, he was silent. Each night he had gone to bed after supper, leaving Hub and Clara alone below.

Christmas Eve Hub talked about the dance as he and Lonnie walked over packed snow to Hobbs'.

"Do you mind I'm going?" Hub asked.

"No, I'm glad you're going. You like her, don't you?"

"Sure."

Clara met them in the doorway. She was dressed and ready to go. Excitedly, she hurried them into the kitchen. "Hurry, Hub! Hurry and get ready so we can have a ride when the team comes through."

Hub shaved, washed his hands and face, and combed his thick hair. He came from Gramp's bedroom looking bigger in Albert's suit.

"My, you look nice," Clara said and blushed. "We'd better carry our shoes and wear pacs to keep our feet warm. We'll probably have to walk back. I'm going to get a new dress in town. I'll change somewhere in there."

She sat down near the stove and displayed her legs as she pulled a pair of heavy, home knit socks over her stockings and put on leather shoepacs.

They heard the team coming—men yelling and swearing, until they saw Clara in the doorway. Lonnie watched Hub and Clara get on the back end of the big log sled.

The driver spoke to the horses; the sled started and soon disappeared down the road. Lonnie turned and went in the house.

He did not go to sleep until near midnight. The night was cold and clear and still. A pale moon high above the cliffs slipped down on its morning course. In the big timber a great horned owl flapped its wings in ghostly quiet and sent rabbits scurrying to cover with the alarm of his treetop call: *Who, who . . . who, who-o-o.*

Lonnie heard Hub and Clara across the clearing, laughing and talking, their voices carrying plainly on still air. He got up, put on his clothes, and—downstairs—lighted the lamp.

Hub and Clara burst into the house like two children, stamping snow from their feet. Hub swung a loaded gunny sack from his shoulder.

"Weighs almost as much as you do," he said to Clara and put his arm around her as she came closer to him, her eyes bright and cheeks flushed.

"We got a ride and Hub carried me part way, Lonnie," Clara said as she shut Tim's door. "Spruce up the fire. We're going to celebrate Christmas Eve."

Lonnie looked at the clock. "It's after five."

Clara jerked off her fur bonnet and shook her curls.

"I don't care if it's after seven. I never had so much fun since before I lived with that old—with Gramp."

Hub said, "We had a good time. We've got two bottles of beer and a small bottle of whiskey. And a goose. And presents for everybody. I danced nearly every dance with Clara. Don't you think she looks nice in her new dress—all black? Changed in the back end of the store. Here's the old one . . . Let's have a drink. All Swanson's men are in town—drunker than hoot owls. Couple came in to the dance and wanted to dance with Clara. I told 'em no, she's my girl. Aren't you, Clara?"

She moved closer to him and he kissed her. "Come on," he laughed, "open up the beer for Lonnie. I'm going to have a drink of whiskey."

"Me, too," Clara said. "Just one—to celebrate."

She did look well in her plain black dress, Lonnie thought. Seated at the table, he watched her in rapt silence while Hub unpacked the gunny sack; and he saw Hub smile at her when she looked at him.

HUB and Clara each drank a hot whiskey sling. Lonnie sipped a glass of beer. Hub went outdoors and got a small balsam he had cut for a Christmas tree. They set it up near the front door and fixed presents in store wrappings about it. Clara, spurred on by her sling, made a great show of getting stuffing ready for the goose.

As first streaks of dawn showed in the east Lonnie went back to bed. He heard Hub and Clara whisper below.

Hub said, "You know I want to stay, Clara, but I can't. I can't trust myself. I've got to get him out there while I'm at it, or I never will; and he's got to go. The doctor said so. He can't go alone. I'd never feel right if—"

"I know," she said, "you aren't built that way."

When Hub joined him in bed, Lonnie whispered, "She's nice, isn't she?"

"You bet. Different."

"Do you want to marry her?"

"Un-uh. I can't."

"Why not?"

"I've got to get you to Colorado Territory. We've got to get up in the mountains as soon as we can. We'll have enough money by New Year's. I asked about the railroad fare in town tonight."

"But couldn't I go out there alone and you stay here, Hub?"

"What would you do out there alone? No, we're going; and you're going to sit around like that doctor said. I'll get a job. And you'll get well. I'm not going to leave you for a woman. We've put it off too long now."

"But you like her lots," Lonnie whispered.

"Sure, I do."

"What do we do out West all the time, Hub?"

"Like the doctor said—you rest. After awhile we'll get a place to stay."

"Couldn't we take Clara and Tim along?"

Hub listened to the fire crackle below. Finally he said, "No, we couldn't afford it. Forget it and go to sleep."

"If you were married to her you could live in town summers. Have a garden and a little house with things. And work in the woods winters."

"There's no use thinking of it."

But he knew Lonnie would think of it, and he, himself, would, too.

"If it wasn't for me," Lonnie sighed. "If things weren't this way."

If things weren't this way. The words repeated in Hub's thoughts. But things were this way; and they had been so for a long time. He thought of Clara and how happy she had been at the dance. It had been pleasant to be with her; and he found pleasure in remembrance of the way she had welcomed his nearness when they danced.

HERS was no common appeal, but the attractiveness of a good and wholesome woman; and he realized any man would not be worthy of her who could not see this.

"I don't want you to kiss me when we're on the dance floor, Hub," she had said. "But I do on the way home."

And he smiled to himself now at that remembrance and the remembrance of the eager kisses she had given him on the ride from Sioux City to the corners.

Christmas day dawn faded slowly against a dim sun in a heavy sky as the four slept. Mid-morning warmth brought partridges into clearings to look for gravel; and deer left the swamps for slashings in search of browse. Three singing lumberjacks woke Tim. His shrieks of joy at sight of the tree and presents roused the rest.

Clara, excitement of the night before showing in her flushed cheeks, cooked breakfast. Hub laughed as she mixed pancakes. As the circles of dough bubbled in the frying pan he asked, "What are those black specks in them?"

"What black specks?" Clara's eyes darted to the frying pan; then to a kettle on the stove shelf; and her mouth opened with surprise. "Hub, I guess I'm a little drunk or something. I mixed 'em with last night's tea water."

"I know you did. I watched you."

He laughed again; and she did too. He thought, *This is the way a man should live.*

"Never mind," he said. "We'll eat 'em anyway. We don't care."

In the afternoon Tim wanted to go for a walk. "And look at the place where the bear holed up."

Lonnie asked, "That one by the cliff you showed me?"

Tim nodded, "Huh-huh," bright-eyed.

Lonnie said, "Un-uh, I'll stay here."

As the three left the house Clara said to Hub, "What's troubling him? He seems so blue. Is it because he feels sick?"

"No-o. Just worrying. Because we're leaving, I guess."

Clara smiled up at him. "I wish you'd change your mind. I wish you didn't have to leave.

"I wish we didn't have to either, Clara, but we do."

THE day after New Year's was Sunday. Hub announced that he and Lonnie would leave on the next day.

"We'll work tomorrow. That'll give us more pay. We'll have enough for our tickets and some left over. I'll tell Swanson in the morning, and we'll have everything in shape to walk to town right after supper."

"Why not wait and go with the team in the morning?" Clara asked..

"I want to get to Council Bluffs for that noon train."

Clara went in her bedroom then.

Lonnie watched Hub's face as they took chairs at the table. "She feels bad," he said.

Hub nodded. "She knows she'll never see us again; and it will be pretty lonesome here when we're gone." He raised his voice slightly: "I don't know what she'll do for a living either."

"I'll get along," Clara said in a flat voice; and Hub and Lonnie glanced at each other quickly. "I always have."

"Now, see," Lonnie whispered. "There's two people feel bad—all because of me."

Dusk had come. Hub lighted the lamp. "Come on out, Clara," he called, "and we'll play cards."

"I've gone to bed. I felt tired. Tim can come in when he's ready."

Tim put his blackboard away quietly, gave Hub and Lonnie reproachful glances, and tiptoed into Clara's bedroom.

"I guess we'd better go to bed," Hub said.

During the night a snowstorm came in from the northwest. Shortly after daylight Hub and Lonnie were on the road to Swanson's, indistinct in drifting snow. A few men had not returned from their holiday in town. Those who were ready for work came in to breakfast as Hub and Lonnie reached the chuckhouse.

As the men left the breakfast tables Swanson walked to his office and called: "Hey, you, Miller, come in here."

When Hub stood in the office doorway, his wide shoulders nearly filling it, Swanson said, "Sit down. Here, want a cigar? Or don't you smoke early in the morning?"

Mystified, Hub sat down and took the cigar. He heard Lonnie as he gathered dishes at the tables and stacked them in the kitchen.

"Chuck doesn't get enough work out of these men." Swanson used his crisp tone and made no effort to speak quietly. "I need someone to help me. You want the job? Pay will be seventy-five dollars a month, but you'll have to bunk here."

Hub heard Lonnie's footsteps slacken; then he heard him tiptoe over the board floor on his way to the kitchen.

"What's the matter?" Swanson asked and struck a match. He offered the match to Hub. "Don't you want the job?"

Hub reached for the match. "It isn't that I don't want it."

"Well, take it then!" Swanson snapped. "Start tomorrow. I can see you'll do."

The match died to a glow and burned Hub's fingers. He let the charred end fall to the floor where Swanson put his foot on it.

"I can't, Mr. Swanson."

"Can't! Why not?"

"I intended to tell you this morning. I've got to leave. We've got to get to—California. On account of his, Lonnie's health."

"Hell! Send him out there. I'll advance you enough money."

HUB stood up. "He couldn't get along without me." He moved to the doorway. "Thank you—but I can't do it." Turning so he faced Swanson: "I'm sorry, sir, but we're quitting tonight."

Swanson nodded, pulled his hat down, and swung around to his table. "I'll pay you off tonight then," he said.

As Hub walked out to the woods he wished he were like many other men. An unprincipled fellow who could brush duty and obligation aside without a qualm and consider only himself with disregard of the effect on others.

Near noon he became uneasy; and his restlessness brought apprehension. On the excuse he needed a log chain he hurried to camp and went directly to the chuckhouse.

"Where's Lonnie?" he asked Billy.

Billy held out his hands. "Don't ask me, big fellow. I don't know. I look around minute ago—he's gone." He went to the back door, threw back his head, and called: "Lonnie, Lonnie-e-e!

"Gone. Like fat one," he said as he shut the door. "Je-est go. Mebbe gone home to Hobbs' house. Sick, I guess. Too much work, eh?"

Hub rushed from the chuckhouse and cut across the clearing. The cook stood in the doorway, hands under his apron, and shook his head until Hub came to the road to Hobbs' and flying snow shut off the cook's view of him.

Clara came from the barn, a few precious eggs held in her stocking hat, as Hub burst into the house, out of breath.

Tim sat on the floor looking at a watch.

"Where's Lonnie?" Hub asked the boy. "Isn't he here?"

Tim admired the watch.

"Quick!"

"Don't know. He come in. Then he—" He paused as Hub stepped back and looked up at the loft. "Not up there."

Hub went out the front door. He saw fresh tracks which led toward the high point of the cliffs. Each of his steps covered the distance between two of the footprints in the snow as he ran across the clearing. When he left open ground and charged into brush Clara came from the house without a coat and bareheaded.

CHAPTER VII

HOBB'S slashing thinned out where soil had blown from the ridges between the clearing and the cliff edge. Through open spaces in the brush Hub saw the spread of the valley in the distance. He topped a ridge and saw Swanson's camp. Snow blew over the camp buildings like light fog over haystacks in early morning. The snow slackened and he saw Billy in his white apron at the back of the chuckhouse. Then whirling flakes shut out all sight of the camp and only fringes of dark timber beyond were visible.

As he reached cleared spaces at the cliff's edge, the wind, sweeping across the valley, slowed him. He bucked into it and broke through brush and crackling dead poles to bare rock.

"Lonnie!" he called, but knew it was useless against the wind.

He heard the clang of Billy's saw across the valley. Now he saw Lonnie—down on hands and knees, struggling against the gale, crawling over slippery stone, headed for the cliff edge.

"Take it awa-ay!" came Billy's call to dinner. Back went the echo, *take it awa-ay*.

Hub plunged and slipped; crawled against the wind; got to his feet; and, sliding, ran on ice-covered rock.

Now Lonnie neared the rounded edge that curved down into snow flying across the depths below. Then he rose against the wind and raised his arms to slide and jump.

Hub spurted, seized Lonnie's flapping coat; and, the wind helping, pulled him back.

Clara slipped and stumbled toward them. "Knock him down! Knock him down, or you'll both slip off!"

"Let me go!" Lonnie cried as he tried to break loose.

Hub's big fist swung up in the same fashion as the time he knocked out Sweeney, but easier this time.

Clara came up, her face flushed and her black eyes wide. She put her hands on Hub's shoulders. "Hub," she said.

"He's my brother; and if he had—"

"Your brother! But his name?"

"Mother married again after Father died; and Lonnie was a youngster and took the new name."

"But why did he try to do that?" She shuddered. "Kill himself. Because he's sick?"

He pulled away from her. "I know why he tried to do it."

Tim ran up and clutched his mother's skirt. "Ma! Ma! Mother!"

The wind freshened. It blew Tim's muffler out straight and whipped Clara's skirt against Hub's leg. Snow swished against them; and flakes caught in Clara's curls and stayed there as cotton does in a darky's wool.

Hub and Clara put Lonnie on the sofa in the kitchen. Clara bathed his face with cold water.

"Why did you do that?" Hub demanded as the boy regained consciousness.

Lonnie sat up and coughed. "I heard Swanson offer you a better job."

"Suppose you did. That's no reason to kill yourself."

Clara moved to her bedroom doorway. She put her arm around Tim's shoulders and let her eyes shift from Lonnie to Hub.

"What job?" she asked.

Hub did not answer.

Lonnie said, "Swanson told Hub he wanted him to help him at seventy-five dollars a month. But Hub turned it down on account of me."

"Hub!" Clara exclaimed.

"There's no use talking about it." Hub turned in the storeroom doorway. "I'll go back and get our pay. Then we'll start for town right away."

Clara leaned forward on her toes and came down on her heels. "You go back and tell Swanson you'll take the job."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"If I took that job we'd get planted here and never get away, and he'd—" His eyes met hers; and he read her thoughts. "It won't work, Clara."

"It will, too; and I'm going to do it."

She swung around; and her heels clicked as she went in her bedorom. In a few seconds she was back, carrying a battered portmanteau.

"Ye-e-ow!" Tim squealed as Clara banged the portmanteau on the table.

Hub moved in to the table. Lonnie stood up.

"What're you going to do?" Lonnie asked.

"I'm going to Colorado Territory with him and Tim."

"Whee-e!" Tim shrilled.

"But what about this place?" Hub asked.

"Oh, hang this place!"

Tim clapped his hands and scurried into the bedroom. "I'm going to take that watch Lonnie gave me, Ma," he called. "Can I take all my things, Ma?"

CLARA ignored him. "It'll be fun," she said to Hub. "You go and see Swanson. Tell him everything straight, and he'll let you have a team so we can get to town. My father always said Marcus Swanson was a good-hearted man if you were square with him."

"But this place?" Lonnie said.

"I don't care about this place. Only forty acres anyway. I'm glad now I didn't pay the taxes or spend that money. It's been like a prison to me—until you came." She sat down on the edge of a chair. "Go on, Hub! Hurry! Before Marcus Swanson gives that job to someone else."

"What are you going to do, stay out there?" Lonnie asked.

Clara watched Hub, big before her. "Go on, Hub. Please! Or I'll cry. I haven't cried in a long time." She smiled thinly. "I've always wanted to have a small eating house. That's why I'm going." She stood up and put her hand on his arm. "We'll have enough money. . Some day you'll come out and join us."

He returned her smile; then grinned crookedly. "It would be nice," he said, "if we could all go together." He walked to the storeroom doorway, hesitated there and looked back, not sure just what he wanted to do. He saw tears in Clara's eyes now. "Maybe it will be best this way," he said.

"Why, of course," she said.

Then he thought: *This will be a way to hold her; and this way I'll have something to work for.*

Clara said, "Tell Swanson you'll bring down our pig and chickens tonight for the use of the team and bobsled."

"All right," he said, and went out the

back door.

Hub went directly to Swanson's office and found him there, smoking a cigar, his black felt hat on the table beside him.

"Sit down!" Swanson barked in his crisp tone and put on his hat. "Now what?"

Hub sat down near the door. "Mr. Swanson, I lied to you this morning. Lonnie is my brother, and he's got consumption—bad."

"Humpf! I thought that was it." Swanson nodded his head and rolled the cigar to the side of his mouth. As he became aware of silence in the kitchen: "Get to work, you baldheaded little snooper. You can't hear everything goes on."

"He's got to go to Colorado Territory. Not California as I told you. He heard you offer me a better job; and he tried to jump over Hobbs' cliff awhile ago because he knows he is in the way. I've come to tell you, if you still want me, I'll take the job."

"What you going to do about your brother?"

"Mrs. Hobbs will take him out there, Tim, too. She said to tell you, if we can take a team I'm to bring down her pig and chickens—"

"What they going to use for money?"

"SHE has about a hundred and fifty out of the old man's—savings; and Lonnie and I'll have our wages. I can send them nearly all my pay."

Swanson turned to his table and figured on an envelope. "You go get a team and bobsled and never mind—" Hub stood up. "Sit down," Swanson ordered.

He went to his safe; unlocked it, and counted out money. "Here's yours and your brother's pay. They'll need it. Mrs. Hobbs, eh? She'll get 'em down there. Quite a woman. Make some man a damn good wife. Eh, Miller?" He handed greenbacks and banknotes to Hub. "When they going? Right away?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now tomorrow I want you to get after these men. Chuck's been too easy with 'em. Make 'em work. Devils!" He ran his hand into his trousers' pocket. "Here! Take it."

Hub saw two double eagles in Swanson's hand.

"Give 'em to Clara Hobbs," Swanson said.

"What for?"

"For her pig and chickens. What the helldidya think? Her father was one of the smartest and best fellows I ever knew. Helped me out once. He had a lot of hard luck last years of his life, but she was raised right. Take it. They'll need it."

Hub took the two coins. Then he stared at them, for Swanson had given him forty dollars for less than twenty dollars worth of pig and chickens.

Swanson sat down at his table. "Better hurry, if you want to get back by midnight."

Hub went out to the stables and harnessed a pair of brown horses. As he got to the bobsled seat and picked up the reins Billy came from the chuckhouse and handed him a package.

"For Lonnie. Skunk and goose oil. Tell him goodbye from me; and must rub this on his chest ev'ry night. These for Tim." He produced two apples from his apron pocket, then turned and scooted out the door.

At the Hobbs' house Hub found Clara, Lonnie, and Tim in a huddle about a small pile of belongings on the floor.

"I've everything ready," Clara said. "Blankets, a lunch—everything we'll need. Tim wanted to take his blackboard."

Silence now while the three watched Hub as if awaiting orders. He moved to the kitchen table; and Clara scrambled to her feet beside him.

"I've nearly two hundred dollars with the money Lonnie put on my dresser this morning and Gramp's," she whispered.

HUB handed bills and banknotes to her. "There's our pay. All except five dollars." He forced a laugh. I won't have to pay board now. And here's forty dollars more."

Clara counted. "Nearly . . . over—three hundred—over three hundred dollars—"

"But we've got to buy three tickets," Lonnie said

"And supper in town tonight." Clara said and smiled up at Hub. "Do you think I could have a beefsteak. I haven't had any—"

"Why, sure!" Lonnie exclaimed.

Hub grinned down at her. "Of course

you can, Clara. Have what you want."

She tucked the bills into pockets of her coat. "Do you think I could get a reticule too? Where'd this gold come from?"

"Swanson. For the pig and chickens. And he paid us more wages than we had coming."

"Oh," Clara said weakly and sat down. "Tim, you and Lonnie carry some of these things out now and get covered up. Then we'll go. I always liked Swanson. They say he was mighty good to his wife. She was sick a long time before she died. My father used to say Marcus Swanson had a heart in him as big as all outdoors."

She gave Hub a quick look as Tim and Lonnie went out the back door. "Swanson has a lovely daughter."

Hub moved to her bedroom doorway. "Aren't you going to take more things?"

"Did you know he has a pretty daughter, Hub?"

"I don't care about his daughter. You're leaving lots of belongings."

"I don't want another thing from here." She stood up. "This old shack of a house. I'm not leaving anything I care a hoot about. Not a hoot—"

"Nothing, Clara?"

"Well, yes. Plenty." She took a few steps and put her arms around his neck.

"Ma! Mother!" Tim's shrill voice carried through the thin walls of the house.

"You won't drink and—carry on like the others, will you, Hub?"

"No," he said and smiled tolerantly. "I'll send you nearly all my pay. So Lonnie—so you all can have what you need."

He reached down for a bundle of blankets. Straightening, he started to speak, but Clara said: "Don't say anything more, Hub. Just kiss me. If I talk any more I'll cry—"

He kissed her, and they went out. Clara sat on the hay in the bobsled box with Tim and Lonnie. Hub got on the driver's seat and pulled a buffalo robe over his legs and around his waist. He clucked the horses. With a jerk the big browns swung into the road and lowered their heads for the pull across the clearing.

As they slipped into shelter of the timber Clara stood up and put her hands on Hub's shoulders. "Oh!" she exclaimed.

Hub slowed the horses. "What?" he asked.

"The cow! I forgot the cow."

"I don't know what good it would have done to think of her, Clara."

"You'll have to feed and water her, Hub. And then—soon's you can, take her down to the settler's at the corners and sell her. Even for five dollars, if he's got it." She settled back in the hay. "She was always such a good cow. I'd like to know she has a good home."

CHAPTER VIII

A MILE past the filling where Hub and Lonnie had left the logging railroad on their first trip to Swanson's camp the trail turned south. The bobsled went two miles through dark woods before they hit the east and west highway. On this they traveled west; then south through hilly country where the road ran past cliffs and rock-strewn hills, and reached the corners. Here the logging railroad crossed the highway and met a branch line into Sioux City.

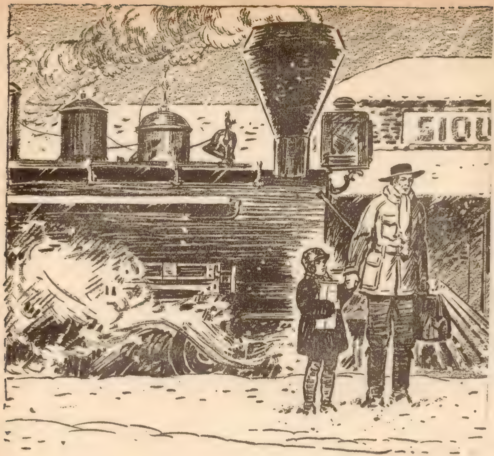
Now three miles south and west through timber; and here drifts slowed their speed. Then over a well-used road covered with packed snow through a small village. They passed traffic now—bobsleds, cutters, sleighs, logging sleds, and men on horseback—farmers and travelers on their way to and from Sioux City.

A half mile more, and off the road on their left they saw Jipp Grinsted's notorious roadhouse—named the Blazing Stump. Hub glimpsed a few sleighs and cutters in the lea of the sheds and saddle horses at the rails; and he heard Lonnie tell Clara it was there Hub had lost eleven dollars at roulette.

Here they turned due south and picked up the old Sioux River road which followed the Big Sioux River from Sioux City to Sioux Falls, eighty miles north.

Gray clouds dulled the light of the winter afternoon. Dusk came as they passed the first shacks at Sioux City's northerly outskirts. Infrequent street lamps glowed at street corners as they turned into the Military Road which led northwest out of town to wild settlements along the upper Missouri and the lawless country of the Dakotas.

Hub slowed the horses on Fourth Street, Sioux City's main thoroughfare. He saw his future as burdened with responsibility and empty of prospect. In a few hours all he cared for would be five hundred miles away in an uncertain part of the vast



West. He had cheerfully accepted the role of provider for three people; and he expected no reward for the denial this would involve.

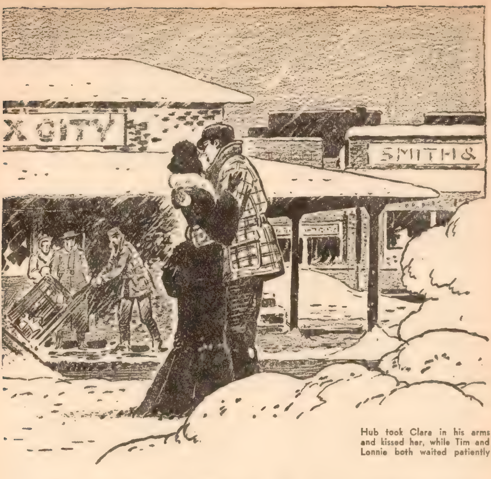
But it meant months, perhaps years, of hard work and sacrifice; and he wondered if he would always be able to get work. A year or more, as he figured, would pass before he could hope to join them. A year of loneliness; a year without much promise.

And his brother would be a dragging weight for a long time. Marriage; a home. He grimaced as he thought that all pleasant and usual things a man had a right to expect and look forward to were not for him. He had so concluded in the past. Now, thinking of Clara, the conclusion held more than its usual measure of bitterness. He knew he would miss her. And he found small consolation in the knowledge that she would miss him.

He let the team follow traffic to the city's center and saw brick and frame buildings which had been in this county seat since the fifties when it was a mere outpost of 400 souls. He pulled in to the Ridings Hotel—an old hostelry owned by a colored man who had acquired wealth by astute real estate manipulations. His meals were famous. But Clara said they would go to the railway depot and eat there.

"It's cheaper, Hub," she said, "and we have to watch our money."

They passed Wayne Musgoes' bank; and Hub saw a light in the bank's counting



Hub took Clara in his arms and kissed her, while Tim and Lonnie both waited patiently

room. Even at Swanson's isolated camp he had heard more banks were closing in these panicky times. He wondered again if he would have steady work for the job he had set himself to do.

He drove to Ebernau's livery near the depot, unhitched the team on the street, and gave orders to put the horses in stalls and care for them. They walked to MacLaren's on the corner. Clara made some purchases; and Hub bought a map and got a bag of gum drops for Tim and Lonnie.

AT THE railway depot, a grayish building hunched down beside a single track, Clara bought tickets to Council Bluffs for herself and Lonnie and a half fare ticket for the excited Tim. Then all four went to the eating room and sat at a table covered with a blue and white-checked table cloth.

Hub spread the map on the table. "See here, Clara, the U. P. runs due west. You'll have to find out in Council Bluffs if you can change cars and go south to Denver or if you've got to take a stage." He grinned at her and saw her smile. "It's pretty wild out there. Indians and buffalo. Do you think you can get along?"

"Of course." Clara's black eyes sparkled; and Hub remembered what Swanson had said of her. "Of course we'll get along."

Hub went on—giving her advice about getting tickets in Council Bluffs. "You've never been west of the Mississippi?"

"Un-uh. I wish you were going with us."

"I haven't either, except down South in the war. Lonnie and I were raised in Michigan. Our father was a lumberman, but Mother's second husband lost all his money. Will you write me as soon as you can, Clara?"

"Of course I will."

A tired-looking woman came from behind a counter and sighed as she waited for their orders. Hub folded the map and handed it to Clara and she put it in her new reticule. Lonnie and Tim told the woman what they wanted to eat and Hub ordered beefsteak and fried potatoes for Clara and himself.

He said to Clara, "You'll have a long ride and won't get to Council Bluffs before midnight. Probably after. You'd better get rooms in a hotel—"

"No, we'll sleep in the depot. That's one of the things I brought blankets for. To save money."

They were silent during the meal, but laughed and talked around the potbellied stove in the drafty waiting room while they waited for train time.

At last their train was made up—a wide-stacked little snorter of an engine with a shining brass bell, a coal car, an express and mail car with an armed guard, and two passenger coaches which were insufficiently heated by small coal stoves. Tim gleefully said the train was wonderful as he saw it puff to the depot through a cloud of snow and steam.

A few passengers got aboard. A Wells-Fargo agent talked to the engineer and the guard. The station agent threw mail sacks and express packages into the forward car and made remarks about a light load and hard times.

Hub and Lonnie carried the luggage into the dimly lighted rear coach. Hub helped the three get seated in facing seats near the stove. He heard the conductor call, "All-a-bo-o-ard."

"Well, aren't you going to kiss me goodbye?" Clara asked and raised her face.

With her warm lips against his, he took her hand and pressed it. "Goodbye, Clara. Maybe some day—"

THE engine's bell clanged. The conductor repeated his warning. Hub walked to the forward end of the car and met the conductor on the platform. The conductor loosened the car brakes with a few turns of a hand wheel. Hub stepped to the station platform and walked to the rear of the coach.

As the engine snorted and wheels creaked on cold rails Lonnie, Clara, and Tim came to the back platform. "Goodbye, goodbye," they called.

Hub, waving, saw Clara throw him a kiss. Then the coach and their faces disappeared. Only rear lights showed. The train's whistle blew; and they were gone.

He walked to the livery stable and paid Ebernau's sleepy darky; and he watched the darky back the team to the bobsled and helped him hitch them. He got in the bobsled and pulled the buffalo robe around him. And he sat there without speaking to the horses until finally they started of their own accord.

The Blazing Stump roared full blast as Hub neared it. He swung in close to the sound of loud talk and light which came through square windows and looked at his watch. Half past ten o'clock. He picked up the reins and the team jogged back to the highway.

Now he let the browns have their way. They knew home lay ahead and stepped out in unison, tossing their heads as they pulled the long sled over the snow-packed road.

Hub shook himself out of a doze as the sled slewed over the logging railroad near Hobbs'. He must stop for the pig and chickens and the cow must be milked and fed. His packsack was in the loft; and he would need things in it.

Past the timber and at the top of the rise he grabbed the reins and pulled the horses up short. Fully awake now, he knew he saw a light at the end window of the Hobbs' barn, and, tied to the walnut tree, a horse. He spoke softly to the team and got them turned and back to the woods. Off the road he tied them to a cottonwood. Then he walked over the road and the path to the front door of the house.

He made plans quickly. His Colt was in the packsack in the loft; and he might need it. Whoever was in the barn might come in the house. If, when he came in, he carried a lantern, tracks which Hub would make on the floor would give quick warning. So, as part of his plans, Hub took off his pacs and went into the house with them in his hand.

He smelled the stale and musty odors of abandoned living quarters as he moved to the loft ladder. In the loft he got his gun and swung down the ladder with the packsack over his shoulder and the Colt in his hand. He put the packsack on the table, arranged a chair near the front door, put on his pacs, and sat down facing the storeroom door with the Colt's muzzle resting on his knee.

THE empty house cracked from cold and dampness. He heard the horse at the walnut tree paw and stamp impatiently. Awhile and he heard the barn door closed carelessly. Whoever this was felt safe, that was certain. He might mount the horse at once; not come in the house. If so, Hub planned to stop him in front of the house. If he came in the house, Hub planned to halt him in the storeroom doorway.

A few minutes—he heard a man swear at the horse; "Quit your prancin', damn you," and the voice sounded familiar.

Then Hub heard the back door kicked open; and he saw a man who carried a lighted lantern slouch across the storeroom floor.

CHAPTER IX

HUB thought he would not forget the look which snapped to the pinched face as Bart Sweeney halted two feet inside the kitchen.

"Hold it, Sweeney! Or you won't have any use for that money you gave old Hobbs to keep for you."

"Fur gawd's sake! What the . . . I thought . . . I thought you—"

"You thought we were all gone. Well, I came back. Careful now. I can shoot quick and straight. Take your coat off and toss it over here. Now raise both hands. Move, friend!" Hub thumbed back the Colt's hammer and saw that Sweeney heard the click of the hammer catch.

Shocked dumb, or, perhaps, frightened, Sweeney fumbled with his coat until he had it off; and now Hub saw he wore no gun belt.

"Put the lantern on the table," Hub said easily; and he heard Sweeney swear as he stepped right and placed the lantern on Clara's table. "Now stand back there by the door. Throw me your coat."

Watching Sweeney, Hub got a short gun from the pocket of the woods jacket Sweeney tossed to the floor near his feet. He thought Sweeney's black hat made a tempting mark, but curbed his inclination to take a shot at it. Sweeney showed too much nervousness; no telling what he might do.

"What the hell you want?" Sweeney asked; and Hub saw anger cross the narrow and unshaven face as Sweeney's shocked nerves relaxed. "Who the hell might you be, anyway?"

"What do *you* want?" Hub asked and got no answer. "Well, friend, I'll tell you. You had a hand in those lumber company robberies."

He saw Sweeney stiffen; and now he saw Sweeney's close-set eyes shift in the dim and yellow lantern light.

"My arms 're getting tired," Sweeney said.

"Step back and rest your hands up on the door frame. Careful! In the last holdup the company's messenger got shot. He's still alive, but if he dies it's murder, friend. Murder and highway robbery."

"I don't know nothing about it."

"The hell you don't." Hub checked a laugh. "Before I drifted in here you left some of the take with old Hobbs. I've a notion somebody used the old buzzard for a tipoff man. Anyway you knew him well enough to salt money away with him; and you didn't earn the money—"

"I worked at Swanson's—"

"Until I licked you and Marcus Swanson fired you— To keep your ear to Swanson's end. You were going to pull out, but I got the money from the barn where Gramp put it—"

"Eh! You—"

"Sure! The old man put it in the barn as he told you he would. But he died the next night. You've had to wait until everybody got away from here so you could search this place. I put the money where it belongs. It'll stay there, unless you can prove you've honest claim to it."

Hub thought the look on Sweeney's face would be something to laugh over later. "Sweeney," he said, "there's a reward for the capture, dead or alive, of any man who was in those holdups. Looks to me as if you might make good shooting."

"You can't prove nothing!"

"Not now." Hub stood up. "Turn around. Keep your hands up!"

He released the cylinder catch on Sweeney's gun, swung the cylinder out and shook six grease-coated cartridges on the table. He found more in Sweeney's coat pocket and threw all in Clara's woodbox. Then put the gun in Sweeney's coat pocket.

"Here's your coat. Now get out of here. When you and I meet again be ready to shoot or run."

He took the lantern and stood in the back doorway and watched Sweeney untie his nervous horse, mount the horse and pull it angrily around.

AS HE watched horse and rider to the road Hub's mood of lightness left him. Now he found nothing in this meeting to laugh over. Bart Sweeney, the licking he had taken from Hub enough to make him revengeful, knew of Hub's suspicions and certainly would report to someone. Sweeney and his guilty pals could not risk discovery through a man who had Hub's knowledge. They would be gunning for him.

Looks like a shot in the back, he thought as he walked to the road over the rise to the bobsled in the woods. *What about Lonnie, if they get me? And Clara? And Tim?*

Then, as he started the horses, he remembered escapes he had had in the war. Comrades had called him Lucky Miller. His line of thought changed now. As he pulled up before the barn he had formed a definite resolution: *They won't get me. I'm going to get them—and those rewards too.*

He loosened the horses' checkreins and threw an armful of hay on the snow to keep them occupied while he did his chores in the barn. He milked the cow and watered her; then tied her to the rear end of the bobsled. The pig slept while he bound its legs, but squealed to high heaven as he dragged it to the sled. Twelve chickens, except for a few squawks, went silently into two gunny sacks.

In the house he transferred the milk to a covered pail, swung his packsack to his shoulders, and turned to leave. Thoughts of pleasant moments he had spent in this barren kitchen, the only home he and Lonnie had known since the war, held him. He went to Clara's bedroom. In pale lantern light he saw things on the dresser which were intimate of Clara. A photograph of her and Albert in wedding clothes leaned against the cracked mirror. He took his pocketknife and cut a square around Clara's head and shoulders and put the square piece of cardboard in his pocket.

As he blew out the lantern and hung it in the storeroom he thought it likely he had been in this house for the last time; and he wondered what lay ahead now. Would he track down the men whose capture would bring enough money to make him independent of Lonnie? Or would he fail in that and run up against bad luck which would keep him from ever seeing Lonnie—and Clara—again.

AT THE camp Hub drove into the barn and left the horses unhitched while he talked to Swanson in his office.

"I've that pig and twelve chickens in the barn, Mr. Swanson," he said and leaned against the door frame. "I brought the cow down. Until I can sell her—"

"Hey, cook!" Swanson yelled.

"Yes, sir. Yes, sir."

"He's been staying up, too," Swanson said aside to Hub. "Waiting to see what you've—" As the cook sidled in beside Hub: "We've got a pig and some chickens out in the barn have to be dressed."

"Billy be damned, Marcus Swanson, I won't do it. I'm cook here. Not butcher. I wash dishes all day. I'm not going to fix any peeg tonight. Tomorrow either—"

"Oh, hell!" Swanson winked at Hub.

Hub said, "I'll dress 'em."

"I quit if I don't get more help. Billy, I'm cook. Not butcher, an' cookee, an' ev'rything. Je-est cook. Too much work all hellofa time. What good all my work—"

"Oh, hell! Go on with you!" Swanson snapped. "I've seen the time you cooked and washed dishes for two hundred men. All alone too. Nice, fresh, frozen pork, and fried chicken—"

"I go get drunk. Then what you do?"

"Skin you alive." Swanson laughed and stood up, pulling his vest down. "Well, I guess I'll have to dress 'em and cook 'em myself."

The cook scampered away. Hub heard rasping noises in the kitchen.

Swanson sat down and chuckled. "Sharpening his knife. Hey, Billee-e."

"What you want?"

"When you get through with that pig, split it in two and hang it in the toolhouse to freeze. We'll have fried chicken and fried pork tomorrow—" He paused as the cook came to Hub's side and pointed a knife under Hub's arm at Swanson.

"I fix that peeg and doze Hobbs woman's chickens like I want. I'm cook here. You don't boss me, Marcus Swanson."

"I'll help," Hub said and laughed at sight of Billy's impish expression.

"Say! Billy, I don't need help. I dress more peegs than Swanson ever see all the time he's in woods an' more chickens Hobbs woman ever got." He darted to the front door of the chuckhouse. "But mebbee I cook 'em; mebbe I don't."

"Best cook I ever knew," Swanson said.

Hub sat down and briefly told Swanson of his trip to town and the meeting with Sweeney at Hobbs' house.

"Then he was the one who left the money with old Hobbs?" Swanson said.

"Yes, and one of the men who held up the company's messengers."

"Seems so." Swanson stroked his mustache. "Though what I saw of him the fellow didn't seem to have brains enough to stage a holdup. What gets me is how they know when the money is coming out here and who brings it."

"Sweeney and old Hobbs the last time," Hub suggested.

"Yes . . . might be. But how would they know. Last time no one knew it was coming out, except company officers, and me—and my daughter, Daisy."

"The messenger?"

"No. For one reason he got shot."

"Billy—the cook?"

"Oh, no." Swanson shook his head positively. "No, not Billy. He didn't even know it. No, there's somebody back of it all. There's more coming out before long. I'm about out here. This time will be different. The last time they held me up south of Sioux City. Time before that not far from Jipp Grinsted's gambling joint. This time our man won't have any money until he leaves Sioux City, and he'll have a guard from there out. Somebody I can trust—"

HE PAUSED and studied Hub, working his jaws while he turned his thoughts over in his mind. Presently he brought his gray eyes into direct line with Hub's brown ones and let his face show he had reached a decision.

"You want the job, Miller?"

"I was hoping you'd get around to that."

Swanson raised his heavy eyebrows. "You figure to get a line on who's doing it, eh?"

"Get a line on them and round them up and—"

"Win those rewards," Swanson finished. "Well—" He paused and jerked off his hat and smoothed his shining, silver gray hair. "That's what I was thinking." He stood up. "They may not try it again. We'll see. I'll be thinking about it. Now—" He looked at his watch and snapped the cover shut. "I'm going to bed. It's after midnight."

CHAPTER X

DAYS grew longer and February's first thaw came. A cold night, lighted by a round moon over dark timber, followed a day which had hinted spring.

After supper the team brought Clara's first letter. Swanson called Hub into his office and handed it to him. Hub leaned against a support post in the kitchen and read Clara's upright writing by dim and flickering lamplight.

Billy, to hide intense curiosity, pretended to be busy at the stove.

As Hub folded the letter Billy asked: "What you got? Letter from Hobbs woman or Lonnie?"

"Clara. You can read it."

Billy sighed with relief and took the letter. He jiggled a pair of spectacles into crooked position on his nose but found the lenses too clouded. "Damn!" he exclaimed and put the spectacles in his apron pocket. "I can read good."

As a child would struggle with a grade reader he read aloud: "Dear Hub. We are here in Denver and settled. We are all right and hope this finds you the same. Lonnie was sick on the train, but is better now. Tim is going to school. We have a house rented. A small house with a porch for Lonnie to sit outdoors in the sun. Hub, just think, it has—"

As Billy struck this snag he sat down on a bench, apron stretched tightly across his knees, a worried look on his oily face.

"That word . . . Oh! They got a cistern and a pump. Fine! Eh? Ain't that nice?"

He read on: "Hub, what do you think? I've bought a lunchroom cheap. The man wanted to leave; and he almost gave it to me. The rent is only ten dollars a month. The air out here is different. I'm very busy, but will write again soon. Hope this finds you well. We are all thinking of you. Lots of love from Clara, Lonnie, and Tim. Clara. P. S. Have you sold the cow?"

Billy returned the letter to Hub and Hub put it in his pocket He looked at his hands and saw them brown from sun and wind and scratched and scarred from hard work. Across the knuckles of his right hand he saw the scar of the cut from Bart Sweeney's teeth. He rubbed the scar meditatively as he remembered Clara had put court plaster over the cut.

"I'll have to write her and send her the money from the cow. And some more, too."

"Humpf!" Billy snorted. "Pokes like us! You're a damn fool, big fella, jes like me—like I am."

"Why?" Hub asked and looked up at the cook, who leaned forward and squinted at him.

"Because. Work in woods all the time. For who? For somebuddy else, like your brother and Clara Hobbs. For what? For nothing. No thanks. Je-est work! Then get laid off when spring come. Go get drunk or send somebuddy all your money."

Hub wondered if Billy was not right. He tried to shake away a feeling of bitterness.

"I guess I am a damn fool, Billy," he said. "The future doesn't look very good as far as work goes either."

THEN he thought of Clara. How uncomplaining she had been. And it was not for herself alone she had gone to Denver, he knew. Nor because she wanted to have a lunchroom.

"Oh, I don't know, Billy," he said. "It's kind of good to have somebody to send your pay to. Somebody depending on a man keeps him straight."

"Yeah!" Billy shrilled gleefully. "She keep you straight. That Hobbs woman."

"I meant my brother."

"I know who you meant."

Billy started a song; then stopped as he saw Swanson come from the office and beckon to Hub.

"Shut the door and sit down," Swanson said in a low tone as they entered the square, boarded room.

Hub sat down near the door. Swanson turned up a bracket wall lamp over his table, sat down in his chair at the table, and pulled the black felt hat down on his head.

"My company is sending a man from Council Bluffs tomorrow night by train. He'll stay at the Ridings Hotel; and he'll have a check on the company's account at Wayne Musgoes' bank in Sioux City for $15,500. I want you to go in and be with him all the time. I want you with him when he cashes the check and I want you to bring him out here with the money."

"Do you suspect the messenger?"

"I don't know who to suspect. Or who to trust, except my daughter, Chuck, and Billy—and you," Swanson added.

And now Hub saw the same tired look in this man's gray eyes he had seen in his father's; and he knew he could not fail him.

"Thanks, Mr. Swanson," he said.

"I don't even trust my own teamsters as far as I can throw that safe. I think the last holdup was by a gang that had a man working here."

"Is that all I'm to do?"

"No. Here's $200 and a note of credit, if you should need it. Get yourself some new clothes. If you get any leads go back with the messenger and stay in town a few days. See if you can find out who held me up the last times. If you get held up this time—"

He gave Hub the hint of a smile. "It's a chance, boy. And it's dangerous. You want to go?"

"When do I start?"

"Tonight. Now. Take my horse and cutter. My home is on Fourth Street across from the Episcopal church. It's a white house with a cupola. Has a piazza runs back to the barn. My daughter lives there with Suwannee, our black hired working girl."

He took an envelope from his table and handed it to Hub. "That's a note to Daisy. She'll go to Cortland Statler's law office with you and he'll take you to Murt Melvig, the sheriff, and have you sworn in as a deputy sheriff."

"Can I depend on the sheriff's office if I run into something?"

"No. Nobody in the sheriff's office. Oh-h—old Murt himself is all right, I guess. But he has a lot of crooked politicians and heelers around. I don't know what they do or how they live. And Murt's hounded to death—old and tired, like me."

"This Statler? The lawyer?"

SWANSON pursed his lips. "Well, now that's a question. I wouldn't say. Daisy thinks he's a good prospect for a husband. But I—Oh, hell, he's all right. Square, I guess. Smart as a whip. Best trial lawyer in the county. You won't tell anyone much. Don't trust anybody but Daisy, and use your own judgment."

"How long do I stay in town?"

"As long as you need to, if you run on to anything." He chuckled to himself. "Now, listen. Tell Statler I want Melvig to make you a deputy sheriff so you can arrest tramps out here. Tell that to old Murt, too. I want them told that. See what they say to it and how they act; and let me know."

Hub pondered it. Why did Swanson send him to this lawyer his daughter considered a prospect for a husband? If it was necessary for him to be deputized why didn't Swanson send him direct to the sheriff?

And Swanson studied Hub. Men were interesting to Marcus Swanson. He had seen them come and go in his lumber and tie camps for years. He watched them with his knowing eyes and judged them according to his standards. And he knew he made no mistake about Hub. If there was character in a man it showed. He had seen it showing in Hub. He saw it now; and he saw, too, the questions in Hub's mind which he wouldn't ask.

"You're thinking I've someone in mind?"

"I wouldn't want to say that, Mr. Swanson."

"You're wondering about the sheriff and the lawyer?"

"Some. Yes, sir."

Swanson drew in his breath. "Well, Miller, no father thinks any man is good enough for his daughter, especially if she is all he has. Cortland Statler must have made some good fees. But I'm damned if I can see where he puts his money. And I can't find out what the cuss does with his nights. He and Murt Melvig know I'm not going to pass up these holdups. I'd like to see how they'll take this about me wanting a deputy to arrest tramps out here."

He tapped Hub's knee. "This may be your chance to make the money you need. I'm closing up here sooner than I expected. We've about enough ties."

Hub gave him all his attention. "That so?" And his jaw set. "Then we'll be through. No work. Is that right?"

"I'm afraid so." Swanson stood up. "Can you shoot? Are you a good shot? I used to be, but I can't hit the broad side of a barn now."

"Fair. I can hit a man."

SWANSON reached over his table to a gun rack on which were racked a ten gauge shotgun, a Spencer single shot rifle, and a new Winchester, Model 1873, 44-40 repeating rifle.

"This rifle is one that just came out. I sent away for it a couple of weeks ago. Haven't even tried it. Which do you want, the rifle or—"

"Both. I'll have one; the messenger the other."

Swanson handed over the arms. "There's ammunition on that shelf back of you."

Hub counted out twenty greased rifle cartridges and twenty heavy brass shotgun shells loaded with buckshot. He wrapped them in a sheet of newspaper, put the package in his woods coat pocket, and slung the coat over his shoulder.

"That should be enough," he said and grinned. "The messenger will be armed; and I've my single action revolver. We could stand off a whole company with that artillery."

They walked out to the stables then. Hub hitched Swanson's chestnut mare to a low black cutter which had Swanson's log mark in gold on each side of the seat. He stowed his packsack, the rifle, shotgun, and ammunition under the box, and got a bearskin robe from one of the sleds.

"What's the messenger's name?" he asked.

"Jack Springer."

"How will I know him?"

"You won't. You'll have to find him. I never saw him."

"What about Billy? He talks."

"He can keep still too. And he will if I say so. I'll give him the story. He'll tell the men I sent you in to hunt up more sawyers. I'm short three, so they'll believe that."

Hub put on his coat, got in the cutter,

and pulled the bearskin over him.

"Goodbye, boy," Swanson said and held out his hand. "Now see what you can do. If you run on to anything chase it down. Report whatever you think I should know through Daisy. But don't get hurt."

"Goodbye. I won't. I hope I have a little luck, too," Hub said and started the mare.

"Take care of that horse," Swanson said in his crisp tone.

As the cutter jerked over straw between rows of stalled horses to the wide door Hub glanced back and saw Swanson raise the lantern in a gesture of farewell.

I'll bet the old fellow wishes he were young and going along, Hub thought. And the thought set him to wondering what, if anything other than cutter rides, this trip might lead him into.

Would it end in another holdup? And if it did would that give him a chance to track down the highwaymen whose death or capture would bring the reward money he needed. Or would it lead to nothing; and when Swanson closed his camps would he be without work and money?

THE moon crowded midnight as he slipped past lights of Jipp Grinsted's Blazing Stump. And Sioux City's street lamps showed few pedestrians as he turned off the Military Road to Pearl Street.

He tied the mare to a hitching rail before the Ridings Hotel. A colored boy came yawning through the front door and down stone steps. Hub gave him his packsack and orders to put the horse and cutter in the stables behind the hotel.

A sleepy, bald, and anemic-looking clerk rose from a leather couch behind the grilled counter in the lobby. He pushed the hotel register before Hub and handed him a pen. Hub hesitated. He had no home; and a place of residence was required to be registered. The last guest in, he saw, had written *St. Louis.* Smiling wryly he sighed, *H. Miller,* made ditto marks below St. Louis, and let it go at that.

The clerk showed him up wide and creaking stairs to a large and pleasant front room. The floor was covered with worn red carpet and the room was furnished with two walnut straight back chairs, a maple rocker, a walnut marble-topped bureau, and a walnut commode which held a washbowl and pitcher.

Hub looked at the wide bed and clean sheets and thought this mission might have its uncertainties but it held luxuries he had not enjoyed in months.

He was in bed and asleep by the time the colored boy pounded on his door to report the horse and cutter put away for the night. And he was asleep again before the colored boy was settled in his dozing chair in the lobby.

The next morning he took a hot bath in the hotel's bathroom and went to the barbershop for a hair cut and shave before breakfast.

At 9:30 o'clock he was on the street. He found a clothing store near the hotel and bought a complete outfit—dark blue suit, white linen shirt, necktie, silk handkerchiefs, cotton shirt and drawers, socks, and a black felt hat.

At the corner of Third and Jones Streets he stopped at a German cobbler's shop. The faded sign on the shop's single window bore the legend: *Max, The Cobbler—Boots, Shoes & Findings.*

Hub went in and for a ten dollar banknote bought a pair of black low top handmade boots of calfskin which fitted and suited him. Nearby he stopped at the store of a Jewish clothing merchant. After a few minutes of bargaining he got a secondhand, but good, buffalo coat for fifteen dollars in gold.

Back in his room he changed into the new clothes. His appearance pleased him as he stood for final inspection before the long mirror of the bureau. He put on the buffalo coat and found he looked substantial in it—much as would any young and prosperous rancher or cattleman in town on business.

His tanned face and brown eyes showed the freshness and glow of health and youth. Only his big hands carried signs of hard labor now. He was soon to call on Daisy Swanson at her father's house on Fourth Street. But he would not have admitted, even to himself, that the call played any part in the care he had taken in dressing and the masculine satisfaction he found in his new clothes and good looks.

HE WENT downstairs and put his buffalo coat over the foot rail at wide front windows in the lobby. Then sat down in a rocking chair and saw he had a good view of the town's main business section. He planned to call at Swanson's home after dinner; and had nothing to do now but loaf. A good way to spend an hour or so was to sit in this comfortable chair and watch traffic as it moved along the town's main street.

Sioux City, at the junction of the Big Sioux and Floyd Rivers with the busy Missouri, had known its prosperous and boom times. Depression-free years of river, overland, and rail commerce, and timber, cattle, farm, and manufacturing trade.

Now, in this second panic year of 1874, all its residents, rich, substantial, and poor, felt the money stringency and knew the fear which paralyzed business over the whole country.

Prosperous days had ended last September as the scourge of the panic spread swiftly from New York. To Chicago. To Davenport, where ten years before was founded the first national bank under the General Banking Act. Across prairies and wooded homesites, up the great river to Council Bluffs—the jumping-off point of the Union Pacific Railroad, which businessmen said had caused the crash. Thence along railways, rivers, and stage lines, like a contagious disease, to towns on the rivers.

The relentless panic squeezed hard. Weak and insecure quickly went under. Bankers counted dwindling cash reserves and called notes which honest men could not pay and others refused to honor. Banks offered good bonds and prime paper, but found no markets with cash to buy or discount their securities. Businessmen worried in gloom and despondency—or shot themselves. Others departed for the lawless territories.

Hidden speculations, frauds, embezzlements came to light. People gasped and wondered how such things could have gone undisclosed so long. Desperate men, stressed out of their right minds, joined crooks and preyed upon their fellows. Holdups, robberies, murders, suicides increased. In the East, the hungry mumbled in bread lines. In Chicago they rioted. In the West, Southwest, and Northwest men turned outlaws, bandits, highwaymen, and road agents.

Substance faded from all markets—stocks, bonds, fur, cotton, wool, tobacco, farm produce, land, and cattle—as prices plunged downward. Fortunes, years in the building, vanished overnight. Government bond prices fell. Government currency shrank. Banknotes became worthless; banks failed. Gold disappeared. People refused to buy at any price. Mortgagors defaulted. Tax delinquencies increased. And the guilty shivered in the shadow of disclosure; the innocent shuddered in the darkness of uncertainty.

WHERE, when would it end and what was coming?

Hub had seen signs of the depression when he bought his clothes. The Jewish merchant had haggled, but had eagerly accepted for the buffalo coat about one-half what he would have refused a year ago. And Hub had seen no customers in the clothing store during the hour he spent there while he bought his suit and other apparel.

He saw signs of financial trouble now as he gazed through the hotel windows. An empty store building to his left across the street. Unsmiling faces of men and women who hurried on board and plank walks. Gaunt, listless, unemployed men who huddled for close talk and grumbling in the lea of Wayne Musgoes' bank at the far corner to his right. And he heard mention of hard times and word of no business by men who came and went through the front door or stood in the lobby behind him.

This set him to thinking of his future again. Had he set out on a luckless venture which carried odds heavy against him? A wild goose chase? He considered his chances and found slight hope of success. And what would he do if he failed? Swanson had said he would close his camps soon.

But I can't fail, he thought. And out of this realization came determination that he wouldn't. He knew Bart Sweeney had had something to do with one of the holdups. Luck or no luck, somehow, he would find the men in back of Sweeney and get the rewards Swanson's company offered for their capture, dead or alive.

CHAPTER XI

DAISY Swanson heard familiar homey sounds in the kitchen of her father's house—clatter of dishes and silverware, the kat-chooing of the hand pump at the sink as Suwannee pumped water from the cistern. Then the black girl's happy tones as she sang at her early afternoon dish washing.

This crisp winter day was Thursday, and, according to custom, all hired girls took Thursday afternoons off. Daisy knew that Suwannee would shortly come upstairs to her back room and dress in treasured finery and a cast-off fur coat Daisy had given her. Then a Suwannee would parade downtown. After two hours or so of aimless peering in store windows and giggling with friends she would return, cold but excited, in time to cook supper. She would buy little, if anything, for Suwannee saved her three dollars weekly wage for a wedding dress and fixings for her own house when she got it.

Daisy remembered Cortland Statler planned to call this evening. They would talk in the parlor and go for a ride about town in a livery rig. The prospect promised no especial thrill. She wondered why this was so. Although aware that an unspoken but growing understanding between her and the town's most promising lawyer should please her, she was not sure she loved or ever could love Cortland Statler enough to become his wife.

While helping Suwannee with morning housework she had been worried by her doubts. Now, alone in her colorful bedroom, her afternoon dressing finished, she was again troubled by them. And it gave her a measure of apprehension. For, she thought, if it was not meant that moonlighted hours in a cutter with handsome, blond Cortland Statler should stir her—how could she be happy married to any man?

Daisy was Marcus Swanson's only child; and she knew he worshipped her. After graduation from boarding school at Whitby,, Ontario, Canada, she had discovered he expected her to fill a place in his home and affections left vacant by her mother's death when she was a child. She wondered if she had been mindful enough of his loneliness lately—way out at his tie camps in the woods. She resolved to write him oftener and next Sunday she must take a horse and cutter and visit him.

She tought of these matters as she sat before her dressing table and fingered side curls of her hair-do. Now she clamped long ruby earrings to small ear lobes. Then let her hands rest in her lap while she contemplated herself in the mirror.

Her reflections showed signs of good living and good thinking. Her gray eyes sparkled large and steady with frankness, intelligence, and a hint of mischief or humor. She knew she was good looking. That her brown hair, fair complexion, and rounded figure had been envied by even more strikingly pretty women.

And while it pleased her to see she was attractive, she knew she was not completely happy. She did not exactly know why. It was the right of every young woman to be gloriously in love. But sometimes Daisy thought she was not sure she could ever be in love with any man at least of those she knew.

She had been courted by her full share of beaux. Now, in her twenty-third year, she had many admirers among Sioux City's young men, but her suitors had sifted to two. Cortland Statler, who was older than she by fifteen years, and young Harry Carstens, son of a prosperous hardware merchant, who went to business college in St. Louis and wrote her lovesick letters twice a week.

HER afternoons in this frontier community were often dull. Many evenings bored her, too. Last August, before her father left for his camps, she had confided to him that she thought of applying as a teacher in the grade school. But he had won her promise to put it off for this winter.

"And Father," she had said, "I don't know about Harry. He is simply going to take another year of bookkeeping at St. Louie and then settle down in his father's store and expect me to marry him. His people have money and he's nice, but some way he never—stirs me. I know he will always be around. I'd like a man who would make me go—well, somewhere and do unexpected things. One I can't count on, I guess."

"How about Cort Statler?" Swanson asked. "He seems to be unexpected enough."

"I don't know. He's so sort of superior. I don't mean he really is. But I just feel he's playing with me. He is brilliant. Witty and entertaining, but I don't think he could ever love anybody but himself."

"He doesn't strike me as any too dependable," Swanson said.

"Sometimes I've seen a queer look in his eyes. He, he—I feel as if he is hypnotizing me."

She had not told her father she did not exactly trust Cortland Statler. This busy lawyer who, folks whispered, had fled the East for a new life. Who, it was faintly rumored, played cards and had been seen with questionable women.

"I haven't had time to judge them yet." Swanson said. "Both are fair men, I guess. There are better ones for you, I'd say. Harry's the most reliable; and he's nearer your age. Statler doesn't quite fit our ways, does he? But you'll come to know if you love either one or someone else. It will be some little thing. Women are like that, so your mother used to say. When you do get married you can live here, you know."

Daisy remembered this conversation now. She wondered if she would ever become settled. Sometimes she felt she had not completely passed from girlhood to womanhood. At times she felt inclined to do girlish things and think almost childish thoughts—imaginings she believed she should have outgrown in her teens. There were times when she surprised herself in moods which were not exactly ladylike, as she understood the meaning of that word.

She let herself drift into one of these moods now; and stood up and away from her dressing table bench. She smoothed her long and full skirt and her silk petticoats rustled as she made a low curtsy to an imaginary figure.

The dream man who came smilingly past her field bed was too handsome in a tall commanding way. Daisy was not sure from what remembrance she conjured him. Nor just how he looked. At times he had black hair and brown eyes. Then again he had brown eyes and brown hair.

BUT she knew he came to claim her. To pick her up and kiss her passionately. To bid her fly with him to far places. Away from this backwoods town where she had grown up as Marcus Swanson's only daughter. Where she was expected to inherit her father's property. And settle down to an ordered life with a steady, respected husband, a family, and a routine of meals, church, and sewing.

They, she and her dream man, would go to Chicago, New York, New Orleans, California, and Mexico. Do thrilling things. Have gay times under magical moons. He would be unpredictable as her lover and not dependable as her husband. And no doubt he would hurt her. But she would love him because he would thrill her.

She whirled about a few times as, in fancy, she danced with him. She heard soft music and let the dream man kiss her and whisper endearing words in her ear.

Then, suddenly, he vanished.

Surprised, she had seen Suwannee's black reflection in her mirror.

"Mercy, Suwannee! How did you get here? You mustn't come stealing into my bedroom that way."

Suwannee's face was black and shining as young crow feathers. But her full and rounded bosom held a heart as true and loyal as any. And her sun rose and set in this house and on Daisy Swanson.

Black eyes rimmed with white from excitement, Suwannee panted: "Laws, Miz Daisy! Did yoall know 's a han'some stwangah, young gen'um, been a clapperin' ouah doah bell? Hims done give me dis hyah fo yo fum yo pa."

"Gracious, Suwannee! Who is he? Why didn't you call me so I could see him?"

"See hims? Ka, ka, honey bun. Ise got hims in da pahlah on ouah sofa nowah, waintin' fo to see yo fo talk hims got fo you. Hims got yo pa's hawse an' cuttah outside—"

She expertly fingered Daisy's curls. "Yo suah looks gorge-es. Yo hayah's ahmos like angels.' Umm-m. An' yo cheeks is comin' pink. Oh laws, Miz Daisy, yoall 's blushin'. Nowah, keep yo eyes a fetchin' an' gwane daown an' witch hims."

"Suwannee, you're a caution. Let me read Father's letter first."

"Yassum," Suwannee agreed.

Daisy took a button hook from her dressing table and slit open the envelope:

Dear Daughter:

The bearer of this is Mr. Hubert Miller, one of my foremen. Call him Hub. He was a second lieutenant in the war; and can be trusted, if I judge him rightly. I have sent him in to meet the company's payroll messenger at the Ridings Hotel Thursday night and see if he can find out who held up our messengers.

Arrange that he meets Cortland Statler and is by him introduced to Murt Melvig, the sheriff, as I want Murt to deputize him. Take him to Statler's law office and tell Statler I want Miller made a deputy sheriff so he can arrest tramps out here.

Do what you can to help him as he is new in this country. He will report to you. You can send sealed notes by my teamsters. Leave the notes at MacLaren's for the teamsters to pick up there if you do not see them on the street.

Your Father

"HE HAS come in on business for Father. I'm to take him downtown—Oh, Suwannee!" Daisy patted the black face. "A strange man! Is he really handsome?"

"Yassum. Ah swears it, he is." Suwannee's perfect white teeth glistened. "Hims is long an' wide most as a doah. An' hims got brown eyes an' hims big an' elegant as a beah in hism's buffalo coat. I smells bay wum on hism's bwan face when Ise took hism's coat an' him gimme yoah pa's lettah fum da pocket. Miz Daisy, yoah pwayahs is ansahed an' dis hyah man cum foah yoall. Foah suah, I guess, 'tis."

"Suwannee! What do you know about my prayers?"

"Ka, ka. Ise seen yo twapseein' an' ah heeah yo singin'. An' doan I pway foah a fittin' stwangah man mahsef?"

"Is my skirt all right?" Daisy clutched her skirt and twisted to glance in the mirror. "I'm going down, right now."

Suwannee followed her along a brown carpeted hall to blue carpeted stairs. As Daisy swished across a hall rug and entered the formal parlor Suwannee drew back and stood on the bottom step, her black hand on the walnut stair rail.

Hub rose from a haircloth divan and saw Daisy regard him with smiling curiosity that held both friendliness and approval.

She extended her hand and Hub took it and bowed slightly as she said: "How do you do, Lieutenant Miller? Suwannee is completely taken with you and says you are handsome as a big bear in your fur coat. You see, I've read my father's letter."

"How do you do, Miss Swanson," Hub said as he released her hand.

He waited now as she seated herself on a carved walnut chair beneath a mellowed photograph of a bearded man in an oval walnut frame. She faced him then, her hands folded in her lap, only the square toes of her shoes showing—quite formal, almost prim.

Hub sat down and suddenly he was conscious of his large brown hands. For he found this brown-haired girl in the tight-waisted black dress before him disturbing. And she called up remembrance of better days. She had, he saw, her father's eyes and firm chin; and he imagined her soft tones could become crisp, too. There was temper behind her calmness; and intelligence and fearlessness showed. She had poise and an air which made him mindful of his rough edges even though her cordial manner put him at ease.

"I'm to go with you to Mr. Statler's law office, I believe," Hub said.

He returned her smile; and any frost in the formality of this first meeting melted away. He was going to like this pretty young woman whose charm lay in her naturalness and friendliness.

SHE lacked Clara Hobbs' restlessness, but she was as appealing, genuine, and feminine; and she showed culture and good manners. She would be most interesting to any man. Was she going to flirt with him a bit, or was she simply mischievous? He could not tell, though he saw she was as mature as Clara. At any rate he knew he was talking to a woman who was different than any he had talked to in a long time.

Cautioned warned he must be reserved. This was Marcus Swanson's daughter. Swanson trusted him as no man had trusted him since the war. He was here on business which meant much to his employer, himself, and those dependent upon him. His duty lay plain along a way which might lead to the rewards he needed. If he shirked the duty, people he could not forget—his brother, Clara Hobbs, little Tim, Swanson—might suffer.

As Daisy talked he found himself comparing her with Clara; and in the comparison he found little to question, though they were, he thought, not at all alike.

Daisy stopped asking questions about her father and Hub's trip to town. She spoke now of the weather and Sioux City.

Suddenly she asked: "Wouldn't you like tea and cake, Hub? I shall call you Hub. Father said to in his note. Or a glass of wine?"

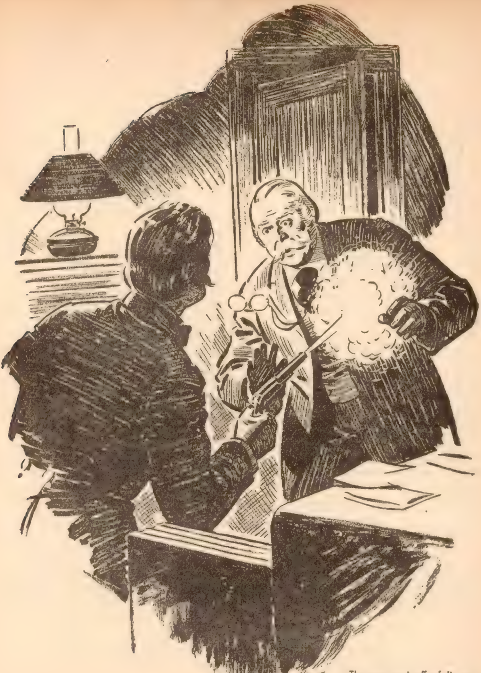
"Thank you, but I've just had my dinner—"

"Oh," she laughed, "men can always eat; and it isn't considered good manners in Sioux City not to offer afternoon callers cake and tea—or wine. Suwannee," she called softly.

"Yassum," Suwannee answered from the hall, "Ise gwan bring it right now."

Hub and Daisy laughed heartily; and Daisy said, "I knew she was listening in the hall."

They ate fruit cake from blue plates. Hub sipped wine from a red wine glass and Daisy drank tea from a dainty blue



The gun went off of its own volition. Statler didn't realize for a moment what he had done cup.

He felt certain now he liked this girl whose gray eyes, he knew, could flash temper as well as twinkle with laughter and friendliness.

Daisy watched him and thought: *He is good and kind; and he likes to laugh and be friendly, but he's afraid to let it show, like Father. And he's got a temper, but something has sobered him and he can control his temper.*

"This is Suwannee's afternoon," Daisy said, "and I suppose we must get ready to go now, too. When the neighbors see her leave they will say I'm not being proper—entertaining a new gentleman caller alone."

She went upstairs; and Hub waited in the front hall. At the end of the hall he saw a library or sitting room which held comfortable chairs grouped about a fireplace. It had been a long time since he had been in a residence as homey as this. Thoughts of his past came to plague him; and he sighed; then brightened as he heard Daisy's footsteps on the stairs.

SHE halted beside him, her eyes sparkling. She wore a black sealskin jacket which had a wide collar, a tight-fitting waist line, and a flaring skirt. She wore, too, a fur hat, which was small and close-fitting, of dark river minkskin, Hub thought. She carried a black sealskin muff; and Hub caught the odor of perfume as she passed him to get the door key from a small table down the hall. He thought she looked more mature now. Then he saw mischief on her face as she watched him put on his coat.

She came barely to his shoulder he noticed as they moved to the front door. Daisy paused to listen; and Hub heard a knock at the back door.

"It must be my egg man," Daisy said. "Only a minute while I pay him. I had forgotten he was coming." She gave Hub a glance which held more of a grin than a smile. "Because of you."

She returned and said, "Do you know eggs are down to ten cents a dozen? I hardly had the heart to give that farmer only twenty cents for two dozen big fresh eggs, so I gave him two bits. They're such nice eggs; and his wife is sick. I wonder what is the country coming to."

Hub shook his head, wondering, too. "I saw eggs go to eight dollars a dozen in the South during the war."

They stepped outside now. Daisy locked the door and put the key in her reticule. He took her arm; and they walked down the steps and to the cutter. He helped her in, untied the horse, and got in beside her.

She did not chatter but talked of things which would interest him as the cutter slipped along the snow-packed way past old houses. The wind was strong and cold; and she moved closer to him under the robe.

As houses thinned out into lines of straggling shacks and shops with sagging roofs, Daisy asked: "Do you know we're going the wrong way?"

"Yes, I know that, but it's only 3:00 o'clock. I like to hear you talk; and I'm in no hurry, if you're not."

He grinned at her boyishly; then the sense of duty which was a part of his life made him serious again.

"I suppose we'd better turn around," he said.

"I wish now I hadn't mentioned it. You are like Father. You want to enjoy yourself but your serious side won't let you."

He felt a desire to take her hand. Yet, if he did, he knew he couldn't let it end there—she seemed so warm and friendly and obviously she liked him—and caution was whispering: "This girl is no part of your business." Swanson had not sent him to town to take his daughter riding.

He swung the mare around. "I'll find the way to the hotel," he said. "Then you must show me where Mr. Statler's office is."

As they neared the Ridings Hotel Daisy indicated a brick store building.

"Cortland Statler's office is up there," she said.

HUB pulled up in front of the hardware store hitching rail and tied the horse. As he helped Daisy from the cutter, he saw her give him a glance which held a hint of mischievousness; and he could not help saying, "I'm thinking, Miss Daisy, that the gentleman we're going to see is interesting to you."

"Did Father tell you that?"

"Not quite that, no."

"What did he say? What did he say about Cort—Mr. Statler?"

"He said he is the best trial lawyer in the county."

"What else?"

"And a prospect for a husband."

"Tst! Well, the first is true enough."

They went up a stairway and stopped before a door which bore the legend: *Cortland W. Statler—Counsellor and Attorney at Law.* And, smiling down at Daisy, Hub turned the door knob and waited for her to precede him into the waiting room of the long suite where Cortland Statler slept and spent his office hours.

CHAPTER XII

A COLD hint of storm sharpened the whining bite in the freshening wind as it whipped along the back street and swayed Heinie Wesenberg's beer and ale sign.

Cortland Statler, at the front end of Heinie's saloon and restaurant bar, jerked a quill toothpick from his mouth and gave the sign a baleful glance from greenish eyes. The rusty iron's *un-uh-ah* as it creaked back and forth over the plank walk sounded ominously like *ha-ha-ha*. In the heart of his soul he was miserable. And he shivered in his miserableness as the sign's mockery repeated in his thoughts.

Customarily he dined at Sioux City's most prominent hotel. But of late he had found it fitted his mood to eat a deferred lunch in an inconspicuous saloon such as Heinie's. He was less likely to be asked embarrassing and annoying questions. For customers of back street places were lesser folk who were not interested in the affairs of men with whom they ate and drank.

He looked at Heinie's cuckoo clock over the bar and saw the hour was close to half past three. He had left his office late after a harassing forenoon; and hesitated now, inclined to stay away. The depression had made people suspicious and inquisitive, pestiferous, a few virtually insulting. Persistent questions did not disturb his conscience—he had subdued it years ago. But they threatened the security of his future and disrupted the peace of his present. He supposed a half dozen naggers sat in his waiting room now. All clients who fretted to demand when he would do this and that and they could get their money.

His thoughts spurted at flames of his worries and extinguished none.

A cool man, of strong nerve, the mess he was in had not bothered him before the depression. Now, with money tighter than a drum head, it boiled. He found his temper heating and his nerve growing less cool, too. This added to his stew of misery. For he knew he needed a full allotment of composure and nerve. Matters which insistent inquiry could arouse to damn him slumbered along a tortuous trail he had left since graduation from Harvard fifteen years ago.

For the ten-thousandth time he wished he had been born filthy rich. As the scion of a New York family with money to throw away. Not of a marriage of an up-State doctor and a schoolteacher both of whom had culture but no means.

Although few in this wild country he had fled to after the war suspected it, he craved and needed money. The need grew more desperate each day. Should he be unable to cover a single one of his defalcations before suspicion exposed it—He shuddered, truly frightened as he contemplated deadly consequences.

He stepped closer to Heinie's clouded front window and away from coarse talk at the long oak bar. Jammed long, well-kept hands into his hip pockets and scowled at dirty packed snow on the street.

In debts he owed nearly $10,000. He had never totaled funds he had misappropriated but knew they ran well over $7,500. Until lately he had disregarded certain crimes other than embezzlement as he believed them safely hidden. But now he realized all would be uncovered if a pebble of inquiry started a slide of disclosure. And he would be swept along with the avalanche—straight to the State's prison, a Federal penitentiary, or a lynching party.

He wore a fine minkskin-lined overcoat with a black broadcloth shell and roll-up collar. Long, heavy, and bulky, the coat accentuated his modest stature and added to his air of prosperity.

HE TOOK his hands from his pockets and straightened his black felt hat. Then morosely fingered his neat blonde mustaches. As he did so shadows of gathering fear and desperation clouded his bright and handsome face. For seven years in Sioux City he had been respected and feared. Now he sensed an undercurrent of suspicion.

A moment of this and, suddenly, he knew he had come to a final decision.

He took a pair of gray buckskin gloves from his overcoat pocket and smartly slapped them against his arm. Then turned a diamond ring on his left ring finger and put on the gloves smoothing them carefully.

A way ran out of this tangle he was in. A way which did not call for suicide or flight to a hounded existence in the lawless Territories. A gamble, but it must pay off. And his mind was made up to jam into and take it now.

As he saw his future, one course, and one course only, could save him. He must marry Daisy Swanson, and quickly.

He had no honest anticipation for any marriage and no honest love for any woman. But he desired Daisy Swanson, and—more important—her father could save him.

Marcus Swanson, Cortland Statler knew, was rich, as riches went in this country. He was generous; and he had money, sound property, credit, and standing. He would go his limit to protect his daughter's good name. Certainly he must help if debts and lack of money threatened to ruin the career of her lawyer husband and her happiness.

After their marriage, he had cooly planned, he would present a cunning plea of temporary stringency. Swanson could be induced to finance him. There would be scenes. But he would be Daisy's husband. And his scheme would work that far. Then, with even moderate financing, he would try for a killing. One night of luck while away on a faked business trip would bring him capital. In these depressed times—a few short sales on a falling market, and his house would be in order, at least as far as money was involved.

What might follow he would leave to the chances and facts of an unpredictable future. He had always lived that way. It was the only way he knew how to live. But he had the inherent optimism of every profligate; and for him luck was always just around the corner.

This was no scheme of the moment. Nor a hastily considered one. He had invented it shortly after he met Daisy at a church picnic last summer and decided she would yield to his captivating ways with women. As he had felt the squeeze of the panic he perfected the plan. Because of it he had been discreet in all advances. Women liked to have things taken away from them, but it had to be done adroitly. And he thought he knew how to be adroit with any woman.

The first step would be easy, he assured his ego. Daisy Swanson considered him a catch. She must, he thought, be in love with him; would be flattered by his proposal of marriage and would accept it. He would urge pressure of his law cases at the spring term as reason for haste. They would be married at once.

ONLY gnawing doubt of his ability to keep certain matters secret had deterred him from action sooner. For one, he had deserted his invalid wife in the East and failed to support her. For another, he knew himself for an incurable and reckless gambler. Others haunted his past. But these two threatened as enough. For should Marcus Swanson ever learn Daisy's husband had married her under either of those clouds he would shoot him without waiting for more.

The way of the scheme pointed to a later course which was risky. But Statler was inured to risk. He would contrive along the years ahead somehow. And if he did not plunge into his plan now the net which daily tightened about him would soon entangle him beyond hope of escape.

He had a sizable roll of currency and $100 in gold in his pocket. Less his fee, all belonged to an aged farmer client. Thought of the money suggested a back room at Jipp Grinsted's. Blazing Stump. The suggestion quickened the gambling passion which was his master. His luck, bad for months, was bound to change, sometime.

But he must, he steeled himself, postpone the prospect. He had an appointed call, almost a business appointment, as he calculated it, to make this evening at Swanson's home on Fourth Street.

He straightened his gray silk cravat, adjusted his starched cuffs, and fastened frogs of his overcoat. *Dammit!* Wayne Musgoes, the banker, had sent him preemptory summons by messenger this morning to call at the bank. It meant money; notes past due. *But to Hell with it!* He would drop in and politely tell Musgoes to go jump in the Missouri. Everybody was defaulting on obligations in these times. Even debts of the United States government were depreciating. His borrowings were not what worried him. Still, he considered, he could not be too flippant with Musgoes. *Dammit!* His notes which the banker held were collateralized by government bonds. The bonds were down, and—they were not his. If Musgoes needed to liquidate and sold them—

He opened Heinie's door now and deliberated on the front step, finding every minute of excusable delay acceptable. On the plank walk he turned north, which was to his right, walking easily, but slowly, head up, to the corner. He hesitated again there before going two blocks east to the main business street.

At the far point of this intersection stood Wayne Musgoes' bank. Across from the bank's somber granite on the west side of the main business street was Carsten's hardware store with Statler's law offices above it.

He saw sleighs, farm sleds, and a black cutter tied at the hardware store rail. He saw, too, a gold arrow on the cutter's side and recognized the arrow as Marcus Swanson's log mark.

BUT what would Marcus Swanson be doing in town today? He seldom left his camps until the breakup; and none of his men ever drove his personal horse and cutter.

Now what? Had Swanson come in to see him? If he had it might or might not mean trouble. Either way, if it had brought Swanson to town, it must be important.

He swung up the street, mounted the stairs which led to his offices, and went past the waiting room; then down a long and dark hall to his bedroom door. His heart raced as he bent and inserted the key. Suppose Swanson had heard something.

Inside he slammed the hall door and put his hat and coat on the bed. Then, as he took time to inspect himself in a mirror over his dresser, he managed to get himself in hand.

The bedroom was wide and unusually long. Statler, fussing with his collar and tie at the mirror, was twenty feet from his maple low-poster bed. And the bed stood near a rear window which gave a view of an alley and drab roofs of shops and houses beyond it.

A commode stood in the corner to the right of the door which led into the offices. Statler's shotgun and rifle leaned against the wall beside a bookcase in the opposite corner. Shells, cartridges, gun cleaning rags cluttered a whatnot shelf nearby; and his cartridge belt and holstered sixshooter hung on the wall beside the whatnot.

Framed and unframed photographs of women decorated the dresser top. Pictures of horses, bird dogs, and one of a nude woman broke the long sweep of the cream-colored papered walls. His suits and overcoats showed in a curtained rear corner. Beneath them on the carpeted floor were collected valises, portmanteaus, and a round-topped trunk.

Cortland Statler had never decided just what he expected from life. Nor had he known how long he would stay wherever he lived. His bedroom, for all its personal touches, reflected this transience as does a guest room in a hotel.

A quart bottle half full of whiskey stood on the dresser. He reached for it now but drew his hand away as he heard a knock on the door to his private office.

"Frank, that you?" Statler asked in a low tone. "Come in." As his baldish, pale-faced clerk entered: "Shut the door."

Frank Wilkes was about Statler's age. He read law in Statler's office, acted as scrivener, office boy, and buffer, and penned many of Statler's letters. His ambition was to become a lawyer who could make juries laugh and cry and believe black is white, as did his brilliant employer.

Statler laughed at sight of the clerk's worried expression. "What's the matter, Frank?" He struck a pose. "Who waits without to plague me now?"

HE SMILED his winning smile, and worry wrinkles on Frank's face relaxed.

"Old Lucy McCurdy for one," Wilkes answered in a voice which had a slight English accent. "She wants to know when you're going to close her husband's estate. Says she saw the judge—"

"Yes, yes! Who else?"

"That farmer from Beaver Township. Wants to know—"

"Is Marcus Swanson out there?"

"No, but his daughter is."

Oh, so that's it, Statler thought, becoming relieved. *Daisy!* What could Daisy Swanson want in his law office?

"What does she want? Is she alone?"

"I don't know, sir. There's a man with her."

"A man! Who?"

"I never saw the fellow before."

"What the hell does he look like?"

"He's tall and husky. Brown faced. Good looking. Rather quiet, I would say. Well dressed."

"What's his name?"

"I don't know. She didn't honor me with an introduction."

Statler laughed. "She didn't—Humpf!"

"She calls him Hub. He called her Miss Daisy."

"Hmm-m. Show them into my private office. No. Wait! Show them into the library. If I need to see her alone I can take her into my private office."

"They're in the library now. Been looking at your books and talking about the dust."

"Moving right in on me, eh?" Statler grinned crookedly at Frank. "That's acceptable. She must feel at home." The idea seemed to please him. "I'll see them now. Tell the others Miss Swanson had an appointment. Shut the waiting room door."

His clerk left; and Statler turned back to the mirror. As he brushed his thick curly blonde hair he smiled at his reflection and found satisfaction in his high forehead and short sideburns. He was good looking, he knew; and he had brains. There wasn't any damn reason on earth why he couldn't get out of this tangle. His spirits rose as his gambler's assurance conceived his success not as a mere possibility but as a certainty.

He buttoned the top button of his dark gray coat and pulled down his vest. Then walked through his private office into the library which separated it from the waiting room, in a confident mood now—ready to bet on any hand his luck might deal him.

CHAPTER XIII

CORTLAND STATLER'S library reflected none of his neatness and cleanliness. Everything it housed needed a good dusting or soap and water. The contrast between it and his clean and luxuriously furnished office was shocking and annoying.

He knew no reason for insisting that the library remain in this condition. Perhaps it was because of some quirk of his individualistic temperament.

He had taken over the office and practice of learned old Judge Jacoby. The judge died of heart failure five years ago while looking up law in his library late at night; and his clerk found him cold and stiff in the morning. Statler settled the Judge's estate, such as it was. He bought the Judge's books, furniture, and practice from the widow and moved in the day the will was admitted to probate.

To all who indicated they noticed the library's condition he gave the same explanation: "It's as it was when Judge Jacoby died. His ghost reads law here at night; and I don't dare disturb the haunt."

The large room ran from the hall to the north wall of the building where two tall windows gave a close view of the flat roof of the adjoining store. Wide oak doors, discolored above the knobs by years of contact with dirty hands, opened into waiting room, hall, and private office.

Open shelves, crowded with worn leather-bound volumes of United States Supreme Court, Massachusetts, and New York reports, lined the smudgy plastered walls on each side of the hall and waiting room doors. Statler seldom disturbed the books. He was one of those rare lawyers who instinctively know what the law should be and can leave the finding of authorities to their hirelings.

A rusty wood-burning stove—unpainted woodbox and an iron spittoon overloaded with cigar butts beside it—stood in the center of the bare floor. The stovepipe curved off and ran under a snow-stained and leaky skylight to a chimney between the windows in the outer wall. A long green felt-covered table stood end to the windows, nondescript chairs about it. Law books and papers cluttered the table; a huge brass lamp took up its center.

The close air of the room retained odors of wood smoke and stale cigars. Its dark corners hid the confidences of those who had told their troubles in it for fifteen years.

Hub had forced open one of the windows and taken off his coat. He rose from an armchair near the open window as Statler entered.

Daisy, in a creaky swivel chair at the table facing the waiting room door, leaned forward expectantly. She raised her gloved hand in a gesture to take in the shelves of law books.

"Have you read all these, Cort?" she asked.

"I say, this is a pleasure," Statler said. "A most unexpected but welcome—These law tomes? No, Frank reads them. I haven't time, and they—ah, bore me."

"How do you do, Cort," Daisy greeted

him. "Mr. Cortland Statler—Mr. Hubert Miller, one of my father's men . . Lieutenant Miller."

Whatever else Cortland Statler might be he was an accomplished trial lawyer. Like all good jury advocates, he could be an actor. And he needed to act now, for Daisy's introduction had slammed a warning through his quick brain. In what dangerous connection had he been brought word of a man at Swanson's camps named Miller?

"How do you do, Lieutenant Miller," he said slowly.

Then he offered his hand to Hub and gave Daisy a smile obviously intended to indicate his interest was chiefly in her—not her companion.

Hub shook hands and met Statler's swift glance. He saw a mask slip over Statler's face. He saw, too, something in the greenish eyes he could not fathom. This man could be, was, smooth. Too smooth for a prospective husband for Daisy Swanson.

HUB returned to his chair and closed the window. "I was only second lieutenant, Miss Daisy. I've no right to be called lieutenant now."

Statler gave him a tolerant nod; then rested his hands on the table and smiled down at Daisy.

"What can your humble servant do for you and friend Miller, charming lady? Command me and I shall obey."

"Now, Cort! Father sent Mr. Miller—Hub—in from camp to have you get him appointed a deputy sheriff. So he can arrest tramps out there."

Hub, watching Statler's face saw the mask slip back over it, and wondered why.

"Will you take him to the sheriff, Cort?" Daisy asked. "Everybody knows you have influence there and Mr. Melvig will do anything you ask—"

"Oh," Statler laughed. "I've no influence with anyone. Mr. Melvig and I are just good friends. But I'm sure he will be glad to do anything he can for your father."

He moved to the stove and opened the fire door. "These rooms are supposed to be heated from the store's wood burner, but they aren't—very well," he said and poked the fire.

He dropped a chunk of hickory on the coals, and, dusting his hands, thought quickly. Why did Marcus Swanson want this Miller made a deputy sheriff? *Arrest tramps—my eye!* Marcus Swanson didn't need a law officer to protect him or his camps. Something lay behind this and Daisy Swanson knew what it was. *But she isn't trusting me with it.* And he found no satisfaction in that knowledge.

Skillful cross examiner that he was, Cortland Statler knew the value of clever surprise questions. He tried to frame one now as he turned from the stove and saw Daisy frankly admiring Hub, who was standing, buffalo coat over his arm, calm and reserved.

"What purpose can a deputy sheriff serve your father at his camps, Daisy?"

"Can't he arrest tramps who come in there?"

"I doubt it."

"That so?" Hub asked, remembering Swanson's orders. "Why?"

"Why? Nothing except Murt Melvig is sheriff of Woodbury County. Mr. Swanson's camps are in Plymouth County."

"Oh," Hub said, and thought: *Now Swanson had a reason for that. I wonder what it was.* "The tramps are afraid of an officer—"

"You don't mean to admit you let a few tramps bother you out there, Mr. Miller, do you?"

"No, not me," Hub answered laughingly. "But they come in hungry and Mr. Swanson feels he must feed them. Maybe he thinks if we threaten a few with arrest all will stay away."

Statler suppressed a snort.

Daisy rose and moved around the table end to Hub.

She said, "Can't we go now, Cort? Or do you wish to see the people in your waiting room first?"

"They can wait. That's what the room is for, when it's you I wish to please, my dear. Just a minute—"

HE OPENED the waiting room door and spoke in low tones to Frank Wilkes in the clerk's recess. "Now," he said as he turned back to Hub and Daisy, "I'll get my coat and we'll step over and see Murt. He's always in his office this time afternoons."

In the bedroom he put on his fur-lined overcoat and took his hat. Then hesitated beside his bed and looked down at the alley which showed as a dirty backyard thorofare past sheds and the rear ends of store buildings.

Curiosity killed a cat, he thought, *but it's this damned uncertainty will get me. She likes this fellow; and he's too big and good looking. Wonder what Swanson's up to.* And then it came to him that he would find out from Daisy tonight—he had to.

He swung around and walked over the Brussels carpet to the open door of his private office and heard Daisy say: "You will have supper at our house, Hub?"

And Hub's reply: "I must be at the hotel. I think it would be best, for I expect the man from—"

As Statler reached the bare floor of his office doorway he was quick to note Hub's pause; and he let the mask slip over his face again as he crossed the office rug and entered the library.

"Are you going back to camp tonight, Mr. Miller?" he asked.

"No, I've business in town in the morning," Hub answered "I'm staying over tonight."

"At the Ridings? The meals are excellent."

"I've a room at the Ridings."

"I've been trying to get him to come to supper at our house," Daisy said. She glanced at Statler and her woman's intuition told her he was piqued. Now, roguishly, she challenged both men with: "I haven't forgotten your call tonight, Cort."

Statler raised his light eyebrows. "I haven't either," he said dryly; then crossed to the hall door. "We'll go out this way. If we go through the waiting room I'll never get to Murt Melvig's."

Hub watched him as they moved into the hall. He saw nothing register on Statler's face which gave sign of what he was thinking. The fellow was being cautious. And there must be a reason for his caution.

They went to the street and crossed to Musgoes' bank corner. Then walked a few blocks to Pearl and Second Streets. Gray dusk of the coming winter evening hung around the town and kerosene lamps burned in stores and offices. People hurried past over plank walks. Daisy walked between the two men. Statler, on the inside, lifted his hat and spoke to acquaintances; and Hub tipped his. Hub, on the outside, felt big in his buffalo coat beside these two of only average height. He knew Statler was watching him, taking his measure in quick glances; and he knew, too, that Daisy was making her comparisons.

STATLER said: "We've been trying to get the Board to authorize bonds for a court house. I guess it's finally settled we'll build one at the corner of Fourth and Douglas. Until then the sheriff's office will stay here." He indicated a low red brick building they approached. "We've county offices all over town as it is now."

They went to the sheriff's quarters on the first floor and found his large anteroom crowded. Hangers-on, persons with complaints to make, deputies, petty politicians lounged in chairs and stood in groups. Obscure in a smokey corner a German found fault in broken English. His saloon had been broken into last night and robbed of the day's take. Across the room a minister argued that the State law forbade the sale of intoxicants in all Iowa and it was the sheriff's duty to see that none were sold in his county.

"Gracious!" Daisy exclaimed. "There's too much tobacco smoke in here for me. I'll wait in the hall."

Hub saw her give Statler a quick smile and caught his assured response. *There is something between these two,* he thought, *but she's too good for him.*

"Hello, Cort," a deputy called from across the room. "What can we do for you?"

Statler acknowledged the greeting with a wave. "Nothing, Burr. Thank you. I just want to see the sheriff a minute."

They were friendly, Hub saw—this lawyer and deputies in the room. And he remembered Swanson had said he trusted none of the sheriff's crowd. He watched the one Statler had called Burr as he partly opened a door marked *Private* and poked his head inside.

"Sheriff 'll see you next, Cort," the deputy called out and shut the door with great care.

A farmer came from the sheriff's private office, muttering angrily. He shuffled past Hub to the hall and left an odor of horses behind him.

Hub and Statler went in the sheriff's office and Statler shut the door behind them.

Murt Melvig sat at a rolltop desk filling his pipe from a tobacco jar he held between his boney knees. He looked up, a look of weariness on his thin face. This was his second term as sheriff of a turbulent county and he was tired of the job. He was a spare man with long arms, who moved with the deliberateness of men past sixty-five.

He took his time now, finished packing his pipe, and put the tobacco jar on his desk. Then brushed shreds and crumbs of tobacco from his gray trousers as Statler, smiling, moved in close to him.

"Well," Melvig said in a voice husky from weariness, "what you want me to do now, Cort?"

HUB saw the muscles of the sheriff's face twitch under his thin whiskers. *He's not well,* he thought, *and he's worried, but he's honest as all outdoors.*

"Sheriff Melvig," Statler said, "this is Mr. Hubert Miller. He's one of Marcus Swanson's men. Swanson sent him in and wants you to deputize him so he can arrest tramps out at camp."

"Humpf! I've got about fifteen deputies now—" He paused and lighted his pipe; then suddenly threw the match on the floor. "What? Arrest tramps at Swanson's camps! Is that what he sent you in for, Mr. Miller?"

Melvig looked at Hub; and Hub saw a spark of mild humor in his tired gray eyes.

"He sent me in to be deputized," Hub answered.

"Marcus Swanson knows his camps aren't in my county. The line is right out north here." Turning to Statler: "What you make of that, Mr. Lawyer?"

"Possibly he didn't think," Statler said.

"He thought; he had his reasons. And they were good ones." The sheriff looked at Hub. "Know what they are, friend?"

"No." *But I begin to see,* Hub thought. "He didn't tell me his reasons."

"Marcus Swanson can take care of his tramps without arresting 'em," the sheriff said, and laughed.

"If I'm a deputy under you can't I make arrests in Plymouth county?" Hub asked, innocently enough.

The sheriff turned to Statler. "Now, how about that, Cort?"

"He can't make arrests in Plymouth County unless he catches the lawbreaker in the act or chases him out of this county into Plymouth. He can if he has a warrant out of this county. Oh, I suppose he could hold a man. But not arrest him. He can't serve papers out there."

Statler faced Hub; and Hub thought he saw a shade of worry on his face. "Why didn't Swanson send you to the sheriff of Plymouth County if he wanted you to have spot authority at his camps?"

Before Hub could answer, the sheriff asked, "What you and the boss got up your sleeves, Mr. Miller?"

"Nothing. I'm simply carrying out my orders."

"Payroll robbers, eh?"

"I wouldn't know, sir."

Hub watched Statler and saw his face reflect no show of interest now. This man was too unconcerned, he thought.

"Well—" Melvig winked openly at Statler—"with so much pressure on me I guess I'll have to, whether it'll do any good or not. Marcus Swanson's a big man hereabouts and you, Cort, control a lot of votes, too."

Statler laughed. Hub saw the mask slip from his face and move back; and Hub became convinced that Statler had something on his mind he was careful to hide and to keep hidden.

MELVIG put his pipe on the desk. "Raise your right hand, young man, and I'll give you the oath." He stood up. "Do you swear—" He started the oath in question form.

"I do," Hub said as the sheriff concluded.

Melvig sat down and wrote on a sheet of printed stationery; then handed the paper to Hub.

Hub read the commission. It ran:

> This is to certify that I have this day deputized the bearer, H. Miller, as an undersheriff of Woodbury County, Iowa, to serve from the date hereof during the term of my office, unless sooner revoked.
>
> February 15, 1874
>
> Murt Melvig
> Sheriff Woodbury
> County

"Here," Melvig said, "want a star?" He unlocked a drawer of his desk and handed a silver star to Hub. "I usually get a deposit of five dollars on those, but since this is for Swanson—"

He offered his hand to Hub; then to

Statler. They walked to the door. Hub looked back as he and Statler reached the hall and saw Melvig standing in his office doorway, hands in his pockets.

"All fixed," Statler assured Daisy as he took her arm.

They walked back to Musgoes' bank corner and talked there in the deepening dusk.

Statler said, "I've got to stop in and see Wayne Musgoes a minute. If he's still in." He peered through the bank window. "Yes, he's back there. Can I help you any more, Mr. Miller?"

"No, I guess not. Thanks."

"If I can, call on me." He lifted his hat and smiled.

Cortland Statler, Hub saw, had his manners and he could be friendly. He saw Daisy return Statler's smile and saw her eyes follow him as he went in the bank. *He likes her,* Hub thought. *But he doesn't ring true, and there's something about me that worries him.*

"Well, Miss Daisy," he said, "I'll take you home now. It's almost five.

Now he saw her smile at him. And her smile for him had as much warmth as any for Statler. She was genuinely friendly. Her cheeks glowed with the evening's cold and her eyes sparkled with a hint of mischief; and Hub found himself wishing he was free to spend more time with her.

"You don't like him, do you, Hub?"

"Now, I wouldn't say that. I'm jealous of him—"

"You are? Why?"

Hub grinned at her. "I wanted to be a lawyer. But I turned out just a common laborer."

"Oh, pshaw! Stop that!" She tucked her hand under his arm. "Take me home. Suwannee will be there now. We've a buffalo tongue for supper. I wish you'd help eat it. Father would want you to."

They crossed the street to the cutter and Hub helped her in and untied the horse from the post.

SHE spoke of commonplace things as they went past houses whose lamplight shone out through long windows on snow in wide yards. Hub found it pleasant to listen to her soft voice. He thought her nearness beside him was pleasant too. A man was a fool, as Billy said, to work all the time for others and deny himself. He thought of Lonnie and Clara; and his thoughts of Lonnie weighed heavily upon him. His duty was plain; and, if he shirked it, it would haunt him forever. But how long, he wondered, would he have to keep on giving up for Lonnie.

"Where do you live, Hub?" Daisy asked.

"Wherever we happen to be. We haven't any home."

Daisy quickly looked at him. "We! What do you mean? Are you—"

"My brother and I."

"Oh. Is your brother at camp now?"

"No. He has gone to Denver with Mrs. Hobbs and—"

"Do you know Mrs. Hobbs?"

"Yes. We stayed at her home."

"Oh. You did."

And now she was silent until they drew up before Swanson's house. Lights burned in the front hall and kitchen. Through alcove windows at the side Hub saw the red and yellow glow of the grate fire in the library. Cortland Statler, he remembered, would come here tonight. Perhaps he and Daisy would sit before the fire, happy in the knowledge that there was mutual regard between them.

"Suwannee is home," Daisy said. "Won't you come in, Hub?"

He wanted to; and he regretted the things which kept him from it. "No thank you," he said. "I'm sorry, Miss Daisy, but I must go to the hotel and meet the company's messenger."

He got out and tied the horse; then helped Daisy from the cutter and walked to the porch with her.

At the front door he said, "If all goes well tomorrow, I may see your father, but I would like to send him a message tonight. Will you write him a note and— Do you think we can get it to the team? One will stop at MacLaren's about half past six or thereabouts."

"Of course. Father said to leave the notes at MacLaren's. Suwannee can run down with it. What shall I say?"

"Tell him, please, that I am here at the Ridings. That I was appointed a deputy sheriff by Mr. Melvig. And—" He hesitated.

"Yes?" she prompted.

"That I think the sheriff thought it was done for good reasons. He wasn't interested in the reasons. Mr. Statler was—"

"What, Hub? Not interested in the reasons, too?"

He thought, *She won't like this;* and he hesitated again. "I think Cortland Statler was interested in the reason but he didn't want me to know it."

"Oh," she said. "Is that all you think?"

"No. You may add I think he is worried about the reasons."

"Why?" she asked quickly.

"That will give your father all the information he expects from me at this time."

SHE became noticeably formal now. "I see. But for my own information may I ask what it all means?"

Hub smiled down at her and saw her eyes search his face in thin light through the hall door glass. "You may ask, Miss Daisy, but I can't answer you because I really don't know."

She opened the door; and he lifted his hat.

"Good night, Hub," she said as he turned to go down the steps. "Perhaps I can count on seeing you again."

CHAPTER XIV

THE seven o'clock train from Council Bluffs dragged into Sioux City more than two hours late and came to rest with a final exhausted gasp from its panting locomotive.

A boisteorus lumberjack in the rear coach of the train's two swore loudly, damning the railroads. Railroads had started this panic which had thrown him out of work. He wished they were in Hell. A drummer announced he would travel by stage coach from now on. The stage lines had sense enough to stop their coaches where a man could get a drink. Not in the woods where you froze to death while a worn-out engine got up steam to make a dinky grade.

The harassed conductor helped a complaining woman with two valises and a screaming child. He tactfully admitted no railroad was of use to anybody who wanted to get anywhere a good horse could go.

Jack Springer worked his way past the conductor and grumbling men in the aisle to the coach platform and waited while the brakeman set the brakes. He was the tallest and youngest of the twelve men passengers in the coach—a slightly stooped man of about twenty-six. The stuffy ride over a bumpy roadbed had been a hard one; and his long legs needed stretching. He was eager to wash up, eat a late supper, and go to bed.

He jumped from the coach steps to snow-covered cinders and crossed three tracks to the depot platform. Walking rapidly, light carpetbag in his hand, he passed the dimly lighted depot, disregarding a woman who clanged a brass bell in the luncheon doorway, and hurried toward Fourth Street.

Hub, waiting in the Ridings Hotel, had heard the train arrive. Five minutes later by the Seth Thomas clock on the lobby wall he introduced himself to Jack Springer as Springer registered. Later they ate a cold supper in the dining room, each making his judgment of the other as they became better acquainted. Hub decided he liked this quick-moving, fair-haired youngster who carried Marcus Swanson's payroll check on Wayne Musgoes' bank for $15,500 and whose blue eyes were steady with frankness and honesty.

Now they talked freely in Hub's bedroom. Hub sat in one of the walnut chairs near the windows. Springer stood with his hand on the footboard of the bed. He had left his short outer coat and black felt hat in his room down the hall. His cartridge belt and 44 six-shooter were on the bed.

He tightened his left suspender and said: "I don't know what good that gun will do me if we get held up. They'll have us covered before we know they're around. I can't hit the broad side of a barn more than twenty feet away with it, anyway."

"I've Swanson's rifle and shotgun," Hub said. Watching Springer's lean and eager face: "Do you realize what this may lead to, friend?"

Springer sat down on the edge of the bed and straightened his long legs. "Sure, I know." He grinned at Hub, showing even white teeth. "We may get shot. Or one of us may get plugged and the other end up with a nice reward or two. I've a wife in Council Bluffs who just had a baby. We could use extra money."

"And I've a sick brother who could, too. Let's settle that now. We'll stick for the rewards and divide if we get them. If you're killed, half to your wife. If they get me, my half to Marcus Swanson for my brother. Is it a deal?"

"It is," Springer agreed and jumped lightly to his feet.

They shook hands. As Hub sat down

Springer paced to the door and back. "What gets me," he said and paused before Hub, "is how they found out the messengers were coming through with the money."

"Oh, it could have been talked around and they heard of it."

"But no one knew it. Except company officers, the messengers, Swanson, and—Swanson's daughter."

"You don't think she tipped them off, do you?" Hub asked, a note of irritation in his voice. "She wouldn't do that."

"She might have told someone."

"You wouldn't think so if you knew her."

"Do you know her? Have you ever had a chance to meet her?"

HUB nodded. "I've met her. She knows about this shipment. But we can't suspect her."

"Women like to talk," Springer said in a tone which implied he thought he knew all about them. "Sometimes they tell secrets without realizing they are telling them."

"Not Daisy Swanson." Though Hub meant it he found himself wondering. Daisy could have given a hint to someone. But who? Against his will he reminded himself she considered Cortland Statler, her father's lawyer, a prospect for a husband.

That Cortland Statler had been in the two holdups of Marcus Swanson's messengers did not make sense. Suppose Daisy in a moment of chatter had informed him of the payroll shipments. The news would not interest him. Or would it? Who could know what use Statler might make of such information? And Hub found himself wondering if Swanson might not suspect the lawyer who was so friendly with the sheriff's crowd.

"Have you any idea who it could be?" Springer asked.

Hub was startled out of his thoughts. "Who? Who she could have told of the shipments?"

Springer laughed. "No. Who held them up?"

"Have an idea who one of them might be," Hub answered with a responsive grin; and he briefly told Springer about Bart Sweeney and the money Gramp Hobbs had hidden. "I don't know who Sweeney is or where he is now."

"The rest?" Springer asked. "Any idea who they might be? Both messengers reported only four men in the last jobs. Bandits from the Territory?"

"Could have been; and they might live here in town. Four or five men can meet out in the woods or hills, put on masks, stage a holdup, and ride back into town from different directions. With their masks off they look like everyone else."

"That's why I'm hoping they hold us up tomorrow," Springer said. As he saw Hub give him a quick look: "So we can get one of 'em and get a lead on the rest from him."

"To win the rewards we've got to have proof those we shoot or capture are guilty? Is that right? We can't claim the rewards on suspicion."

"That's it," Springer agreed. "Catch 'em in the act and win the rewards for all of 'em. That's what I'm after."

"How does it happen the company picked you for the job?" Hub asked.

"The company didn't do the picking, Mr. Miller."

"Hub will do, Jack."

"All right then, Hub. I'll show you." Springer reached into his hip pocket, produced a card case, opened it, and exhibited a badge.

"Ho! So that's it. Wells-Fargo detective. Your people don't suspect Swanson, do they?"

"No! Positively not. But they think information leaks out from someone close to him. How else could the gang know when to look for the messenger?"

"Well, at least I don't have to suspect you," Hub said.

"Did you?"

"No. And you?"

SPRINGER shook his head, smiling. "No chance. Swanson has guaranteed this shipment himself. He would send a man who can be trusted. And you are his man—I guess."

Hub laughed at that. Then he became thoughtful. This was no laughing matter. Marcus Swanson was depending on him to cover a risk which might cost Swanson, himself, $15,500. And Swanson would like to see the bandits caught. Did he suspect the sheriff's officers? *Was that why he had me deputized?* He wondered. *So I could arrest an officer, if necessary?*

Jack Springer said, "We're after the men who got the last shipments. My people carried the risk on them. We aren't much interested in this one, except if they hold you and me up it may help us to get the gang."

"So you'd just as soon advertise this shipment?"

"Oh, no. Not that. But if we're held up tomorrow we'll have something to work on. We're certain who knows about this shipment." He smiled at Hub. "See? But—" he made a gesture of dismissal—"I'm interested in the rewards. I need them. My share, I mean."

"I need my share, too."

"They're doubled now. $1,000 for each man, dead or alive, with proof he was in it."

"Suppose a different crowd should tackle us tomorrow."

"Makes no difference," Springer said. $1,000 for each man who had anything to do with robbing the Iowa Lumber Company's payrolls." He looked at his watch and yawned. "It's eleven o'clock; and I'm sleepy." He picked up his gun and cartridge belt. "I'll see you in the morning."

Hub showed him to the door and came back to his chair. Now his thoughts turned to Lonnie and Clara. If he could win a share of the rewards, if he could deliver even two guilty men, the money would make him independent of Lonnie. He could go to Denver, marry Clara Hobbs and—He stopped this line of thought. Lonnie would be in the way for a long time, even if he did win part of the reward money. And as he got ready for bed he sternly told himself that thoughts of Daisy Swanson had had nothing to do with his decision not to think of marrying anyone.

CORTLAND STATLER had arrived at Swanson's house for his call on Daisy promptly at the proper hour of eight. He had taken unusual pains with his dressing. The cutter he had hired was painted bright orange. The gay color and a new set of bells jingling on the neck strap of his horse had put him in a jaunty mood which had been quite disarming to Daisy as she had answered the doorbell and admitted him.

He was still fairly sure of himself now, after a ride about town with Daisy, as he stood in the sitting room, his back to the grate fire, his long white hands clasped behind his back.

Daisy sat on an ottoman, one small hand held toward the wood fire, the other resting in her lap. Statler watched the light from the flames play on her curls. She looked desirable in a dark green velvet dress. Quite intriguing. It would be fun to play with her. Good sport to risk contempt and get a bit familiar. Perhaps go farther than merely being familiar. If he did not need her father's money so desperately he would risk a try at it. She would fall for him. They all, with one or two exceptions, had been amenable to his charming ways.

In a few minutes he intended to ask Daisy to marry him. Rather he intended to voice his intention of marrying her. As he watched her he stifled a few bothersome qualms. She was a perfect lady, no doubt of that. Friendly, wholesome, honest, and good. And he knew himself for a worthless rake. Not even fit to polish her little square-toed shoes. But her father was suspicious; and her father had money. *I've got to do it,* he prodded himself for the tenth time since Daisy had taken off her furs and sat down on the ottoman. She would not, of course, refuse him—although during the hour they had spent riding she had seemed rather distant. He must get it over with soon, for he had only an hour until ten o'clock, when convention decreed he must leave.

Another matter claimed part of his attention now; and he came back to it after a digression in their converastion. "You haven't told me who this—er, ah, ex-lieutenant is, Daisy."

"Stop cross-examining me as you would a lying witness, Cort. I told you he was sent in town by Father. Is one of his men. I said that is all I know about him."

"But his business in town. Not to become a deputy sheriff so he can arrest tramps. You don't believe that, do you?"

"That isn't all his business in town."

"Then you know his business?"

"Father told me part of it in a note, yes. Why are you so interested in Lieutenant Miller, Cort?"

Statler smiled thinly. If finding out all she knew was all he wished to accomplish it would be easy. "Oh, no reason," he said carelessly, "except I fancy the gentleman might become a rival, if he isn't one now. Is he?"

He had said too much; and inwardly rebuked himself for it. No suitor should suggest to any woman that her heart might be turning elsewhere. He saw Daisy blush; then toy with her curls as she bent her head.

"I like your dress," he said and wished he had not said it as he remembered the remark was trite. "Is it a new one?"

"Cort," Daisy said and stood up, "what's the matter with you tonight? Honestly, that's the third time you've mentioned this dress. Once when I first let you in. Again when we came back from riding. I told you it is new. I sent to New York for it. Have you something on your mind?"

"Yes, I have."

"Well, mercy me, what is it?"

"You."

"Oh!" Daisy laughed; and he forced a thin smile. "Well, I must say you have a queer way of showing it. All you have seemed interested in tonight has been Hub—Lieutenant Miller—and his business here in town."

SHE saw the mask slip over his face and thought he was offended. Things were not going any too pleasantly. She must quickly think of something entertaining to say.

"Speaking of clothes, Cort," she managed, smiling, "I like your new suit," She saw she had touched his vanity. "It is new, isn't it? Blue tweed?"

He strutted a bit. "Yes. My tailor in Chicago told me last fall tweed would be all the go there this spring. I ordered this for a special occasion."

He looked at her as if he expected her to ask, *What occasion?*, but all she said was, "Hmm-m."

Now his strutting brought him closer to her; and she took careful note of him. Keen and hard handsomeness was in his face. She was restrained excitement in his green eyes. His blonde hair was a close crop of wavey curls. He had an air, too, an aristocratic, superior air. But he did not resemble her dream man. Not as tall; and his handsomeness was too smooth. He lacked something; or he had too much of something. He was not even as strong and tall as black-eyed, lovesick Harry Carstens. And not anything like big, quiet-spoken Hub, who could pick her up and—*Heavens!* what had she been thinking?

"A penny for your thoughts, Daisy. What are you smiling about?"

She saw Statler's eyes intent with desire and frank need. She had seen him look at her that way before; and she felt the creepy feeling he gave her. She became a trifle frightened. What if he should hypnotize her into a passion she could never normally feel for him?

"A special occasion, did you say?" she asked as it dawned on her that was what he had said.

She saw him advance a step toward her; and though she tried to move she found she could not. What was there about this man which attracted even as it repulsed her? He had his arms outstretched; was smiling at her. Against her will she leaned forward. His hands were on her shoulders. Under the spell of his eyes she let him put his arms around her and draw her to him.

"You haven't asked what the special occasion is—sweetheart," he whispered.

She shook her head, eyes wide.

"Ask me," he commanded. "Ask me what the special occasion is."

"What is it, Cort," she obeyed in a faint voice.

"Tonight. The night we became engaged to be married. You are going to marry me. We'll go away next week—be married—"

He took an arm from her slender, tight waist and reached in his coat pocket; and the spell was broken.

She pushed away from him. "Engaged! Married! You haven't even asked me if I would marry you, have you? I haven't said I would. Have I? Go away? Next week! What are you saying?"

He opened a small plush-covered box. "Just for you."

Daisy gasped, for the diamond which Statler held toward her was as large as a pea.

He turned so the stone caught the firelight. "Isn't it a beauty? I got it in Chicago last fall."

"Just for me?" she repeated slowly. "You got it in Chicago last fall?" She was herself again. Now she realized what he had said was surely false or he had presumed beyond all decency. "What are you trying to do, Cortland Statler?" she asked, her head erect. "Insult me?"

"On the contrary, my dear, I thought to honor you."

"But if you bought that diamond ring last fall it was for someone else. Or you presumed too much. I, I don't believe you. Frankly, I think you won it in a card game."

THIS was a Daisy he did not know, had not counted on. He controlled himself with an effort. To show temper would be fatal to his plans. "A card game, my dear," he said calmly. "What makes you think I won this engagement ring in a card game?"

"You gamble, don't you? I've heard you do."

"Sometimes. There's no harm—" He stopped. He was backing up, getting on the defensive. No way to win this case. "All men gamble, you know."

"Father never does. He says it's a lazy man's disease."

She felt his eyes again. To avoid them she moved to a small marble-topped table near the fireplace which held a lighted lamp. Her back toward him, she turned the lamp flame higher and inspected a painted scene on the globe.

He came over and put his hand on her back, cautiously; then firmly, more possessively; and felt her stiffen. She was, he knew now, a bit of a problem. Hard to tell just what way to rub her fur. But he could and he would handle her. If he could only get his arms around her again—just once.

"You haven't given me an answer, Daisy—dear."

"Answer!" She swung around and faced him. "How can I answer a proposal like that? If it were a proposal. Engaged tonight! Go away next week and be married! Go where? Where is away? What have you been proposing? Who do you think I am? Some hussy? Some harlot from lower Jones Street or the French section along the river who would be agreeable to your—suggestions and captivated by your diamond?"

She moved away from him. "Listen to me, Cortland Statler. When I become engaged to be married it will be after an honest proposal. And I'll be married right here in my father's house or the church across the street. It will be after my engagement has been announced and all Sioux City has had a chance to—yes, gossip about it."

"Oh, come, come!" He managed to capture her hand. "You can have it any way you wish. What's possessed you? I thought you liked me. I, I—" He saw her weaken; knew her anger was going. Quickly he got himself into a role to invoke sympathy. "I, I thought you'd be pleased," he said and let his voice tremble. "I thought you cared, Daisy."

"I care. But that's not the point. It's how much do you care. If your little announcement of our engagement for which you got your suit and—the ring last fall was intended as a proposal of marriage; then, then—"

"Then what, Daisy, dear?"

"Nothing, except it doesn't sound genuine to me."

"Genuine," he repeated, knowing for once he was caught and stumped. "Genuine?"

"Yes, Cort. I think you've planned to marry me for a reason other than that you love me. Is it my father's money? Are you in—?"

"Listen! Listen, my dear. I do love you."

"Well! You've made a most unusual botch of telling me about it. You've certainly acted poorly."

STARING at him, wide-eyed, she knew she could never care for him. Could never love him. Would never marry him. Something, her woman's instinct told her, was amiss with this man. As she saw him coolly appraise her, his eyes seemed to penetrate her clothes. *Ugh!* she thought; and wanted to slap his face. Tell him she did not love him. Order him from the room. Out of the house. But she couldn't. He was a guest. To treat him rudely would be unladylike.

Suddenly she longed for her father—rough, honest old swearer of a fighter that he was. She would cry against his wool shirt and smell him. He always smelled of horses, tobacco, whiskey, the woods, even after he had taken a bath and changed his clothes, but he was genuine and comforting.

Statler stepped closer to her; and she caught faint odor of cologne. It nauseated her. She wanted to scream: *Get out, you fraud!* Instead she said: "I'm sorry, Cort. If you expect an answer to your proposal of marriage, if that is what you intended it to be, I'll have to think it over." Her manner changed. She became vivaciously friendly. "And now I'll get you that hot bounce I promised you when we first came in."

She left the sitting room, silk petticoats rustling. Statler heard her call Suwannee. Then he heard Daisy and the black girl laugh in the kitchen.

"Hell!" he exclaimed aloud and strolled over to the hearth. *A hell of a note,* he thought; and knew he had made a fizzle of it. He should have popped it in the cutter. Should not have mentioned Lieutenant Miller. *But damn me, she'll come around yet,* he assured himself. This Miller would not last. *I'll get her, by God. I must, and damn quickly. If I have to compromise her to do it.*

The more he thought of it, the more angry he became at Hub. He was convinced Daisy had cared for him until today. Something had changed her. *It's this damn Miller. He's to blame for it.*

Daisy came in then with a silver tray bearing a glass of hot cherry bounce for Statler and tea for herself.

Statler pretended a carefree mood and his quick little witticisms made Daisy laugh as she arranged the tea things.

"Do you know I wish you'd be like that?" she said. "Why can't you?"

"It's my work. I work hard. Trying lawsuits is a strain on a man. I've had a heavy calendar this winter."

And now she was sorry she had been unfriendly. He was likeable—when he was this way. He was brilliant, witty. He did work hard. He must be tired.

Statler caught the change in her mood and put down his glass. Crossing to her, he asked: "Aren't you going to let me kiss you?"

She blushed. "Why, no, Cort. Of course not. We're not engaged, you know."

Later, in the hall, she watched him covertly as he put on his overcoat; and roguishly pursed her lips as she saw him hesitate beside her.

"When may I have my answer?" he asked.

"Oh, in a week or so. This was sort of sudden, you must realize."

"A week or so!" he exclaimed and thought: *My God! A week! And then only her answer!*

"I'm in no hurry to make up my mind about so serious a matter."

HE THOUGHT he sensed encouragement in her words and tone. Quickly, before she could anticipate his intention, he seized and kissed her. "There," he said as she squirmed away, "that wasn't so bad, was it?"

Blushing deeply now, she opened the front door and tried to hide her embarrassment. "Well, no," she admitted. "Not when you do it that way."

She stood in the open doorway, shivering in crisp air, and watched him untie his horse and get in the cutter. Then she closed the door noiselessly and locked it. For a while she stood motionless in the hall. The clock rumbled and struck ten. With her small lace handkerchief she thoughtfully, carefully wiped her lips where Cortland Statler had kissed her.

Then, as if she had reached a decision, she briskly set about putting out the lamps before going upstairs to bed.

CHAPTER XV

WAYNE MUSGOES, Sioux City's respected banker, never referred to the Jewish blood on his mother's side of the family. He spoke of his maternal ancestors as, "My mother's people who came from Germany." Seldom as the Mollers; and then inadvertently.

When he discussed his antecedents he stroked his long nose, squinted his brown eyes, and talked of paternal Irish forebears whose names were Musgrove. The shrewdness Wayne displayed in financial matters he attributed to a grandsire who had made a fortune underwriting one risk at Lloyds and drank himself to death in a London grog shop celebrating.

Wayne had migrated from New York City to Iowa in 1855 when he was twenty-seven, determined to make money. He settled in Sioux City and promptly married Jennie Coles, whose father, Sam, a widower, was a Missouri River pilot and rich.

Two years after Wayne married Jennie, Sam saw Patsy O'Brien and fell in love with her. Patsy, a pretty, designing little hellion who sang and danced on river steamers, had kept her eyes open for old fools with money like Sam. A week after she met Sam she married him, got him drunk in St. Louis, and went West with a river gambler and all Sam's negotiable possessions she could cram into his largest valise.

Sam brooded in Sioux City for a month; then shot himself in a Jones Street bawdy house. The disgrace killed Jennie and her unborn child. Jennie's death left Wayne Musgoes a childless widower and the owner of Sam's residence on Third Street and his defaulted mortgages on Iowa farms.

This was in the years following the panic of 1857 when anyone with half Wayne Musgoes' brains could see a war coming and profits in depressed values. Musgoes foreclosed the mortgages and stocked the farms with mules he bought from debt-ridden settlers along the Missouri. When the *Star of the West* was fired upon in Charleston Harbor, opening the war, he sold the mules to Union quartermasters for three times their true worth and the farms to land speculators for twice what Sam had invested in the mortgages.

The draft came and Wayne hired a substitute to defend his country in his stead. And applied himself to his loan business in a single room next to Judge Jacoby's law office over Carsten's hardware store.

His loan office grew into a banking office during the war. The National Banking Act was passed and Musgoes secured a charter, built the stone building on the corner, and opened his bank as The Musgoes First National. Though not the oldest nor the largest bank in Sioux City it was the first to start under Federal grant. People thought that made it safe; and it prospered.

Businessmen said Wayne Musgoes was well off, honest, and a good banker. This, according to frontier standards, was true. Or it had been until last fall. Then, after the great banking house of Jay Cooke & Co. failed on September 18, Musgoes had lost his head and plunged into a wild scheme to become rich. He foolishly grabbed all the cash he could safely get his hands on and surreptitiously bought banknotes of Jay Cooke & Co. and other closed New York banks at ten cents and less on the dollar. If the banking houses ever reopened the notes would be redeemed at par. This would make Musgoes half a millionaire. If the notes were never redeemed he would be left bankrupt. And worse. For not all the money he had grabbed in greedy haste had been his.

Things were getting no better. They grew steadily worse. His bank was in precarious position. Its cash reserve was down below the lowest point of safety. Its banknotes were accepted because only Musgoes knew how worthless they were. The suspicion that the New York banks might never redeem had now become a probability. Added to financial troubles were others. His conscience bothered him, his nerves had grown jittery, and his heart was acting up from worry.

AS HUB and Jack Springer got into Swanson's cutter at the hotel stables to drive to the bank Musgoes was wishing no depositor would withdraw another dollar today. He looked at his watch. Ten o'clock. In an hour and a half of this February morning $2,000 had gone out of his bank and not a dollar had come in. If business proceeded at that rate he would have to close his doors; and he shuddered at thought of what would follow.

He moved into the counting room from his private office. "Tim," he said to his young teller, "go down to Wells-Fargo and see if that currency has come in from Chicago."

Griff, Musgoes' old clerk, stopped his pen halfway through the first sentence of a letter and turned on his high stool. "You just sent your government bonds to Chicago last Monday. This is Friday. Those Chicago banks can't discount 'em anyway. They need their cash."

"Never mind, Tim. Go down. Stop at the telegraph office and see if there's a telegram for me. I'll take your place."

Musgoes walked behind the counter to Tim's stool at the teller's wicket. The butt of a big six-shooter showed on the shelf below the counter. He picked up the arm as Tim left and idly looked at it. Then he felt old Griff's eyes on him and put the gun down.

Griff said, "That French woman was in here, drew out her $500— You shouldn't have told her she could."

Musgoes turned half around on the stool. "Why not?"

"She'll tell everybody in the French settlement. Now they'll all be up here."

"What would you want me to do? Tell her she couldn't draw it? She'd have gone out and started a run on me inside of half an hour."

"No! Not that. Tell 'em only part of their account. You got some you haven't money enough to cover if a bunch came in at one time."

"Write your letters!" Musgoes snapped. Griff, the old fool, was too nosey. "I'll run my bank. I pay you to write my letters. Not keep my books. I'll do that."

Griff sighed; then bent his gray head over his scratching pen. "Yes, I know. Just the same banks are closing all over. Two more big ones in St. Louis I saw in the paper. Did you see that?"

Musgoes ran a moist hand over thin stubble on his hollow cheeks. "Certainly I saw that." His voice sounded tired. And he was tired. Tired and sick and worried. When would things get better? "Shut up, Griff, and do your work. I want to think."

He rested his elbows on the oak counter and gazed through the front windows at traffic on Fourth Street. He saw a black cutter carrying two men swing in and pull up to the bank's hitching rail; and the cutter bore Swanson's log mark on its side. The men got out. The big one, who wore a buffalo coat, tied the horse. The other, tall and thin, wearing a short black mackinaw, waited on the plank walk. Then Musgoes saw both reach to their waists and hitch up their gun belts.

This was no holdup of his bank, Musgoes knew, but these men appeared to mean business. And he had a quick premonition their business meant trouble for him.

HUB and Jack Springer walked into the bank. Springer swung left to an oak shelf near the front of the counting room and took his time writing his name on the back of the lumber company's check. Hub looked about him. He saw old Griff behind the counter, Musgoes in a gray suit behind the grill, smoothing his black hair, the open door of the vault and the castiron safe inside the vault.

Now Springer advanced to the teller's window, waving the white check back and forth beside his leg; and Hub joined him.

Springer said, "I'm Mr. Springer, the company's man from Council Bluffs. This is Mr. Miller, Swanson's man. We'd like this in small coins and Treasury notes, if you please. It's for payroll; and the company said no greenbacks or State banknotes. The men won't take 'em."

Hub saw perspiration moisten Musgoes' forehead beneath his black bangs. Saw him steady his elbows on the counter as he held the check in both hands and studied it. Then he saw him turn the check over and raise his brown eyes to Springer.

"I can't cash it without your identification," Musgoes said.

"The company said it would be all right. I was to see Mr. Musgoes."

"I'm Mr. Musgoes. But I don't know you."

Springer looked at Hub; then back at Musgoes. "Isn't the check good?"

"Perfectly! Perfectly good."

"Then why not give me the money? It's payable to me or bearer."

"True, but on such a large check—$15,500—I have the right to request that the person presenting it be identified. Do you know anyone here in town who could identify you?"

Springer shook his head.

"We're taking this out to Marcus Swanson's camps," Hub said.

"I thought that might be it," Musgoes said evenly enough. He must think quickly . . . not show nervousness . . . Any excuse . . . Time . . . Delay . . . $15,500 . . . "I'll be glad to send a telegram to the company at Council Bluffs. Have them—"

"That won't be necessary," Hub said. "Mr. Swanson's daughter knows me. We'll go up and get her."

"That will be fine," Musgoes said. "I know Daisy well. If she knows you, I'll feel I'm safe." He smiled pleasantly. "It's just good business, gentlemen, you know."

"Oh, sure," Hub agreed. He turned to Springer. "Well, I guess that's what we had better do."

He and Springer walked to the front of the bank; and Springer's face showed puzzlement.

On the plank walk in front of the bank Springer said: "That's strange. They made it out to J. H. Springer or bearer so I wouldn't have any trouble cashing it. Why do you suppose he wouldn't?"

"I took it he wants to know the money gets into the right hands when it leaves the bank," Hub answered. "Why?"

"Nothing, except I took it he isn't anxious for the money to leave the bank at all."

"He'll have to pay it eventually. What good will delay do him?"

"I can't answer that, Hub. But that man looked worried to me."

"Me too," Hub agreed. "But I guess everybody is in these times."

THEY drove up Fourth Street; and Hub tied the mare at Swanson's hitching post. He left Springer in the cutter, went up the boardwalk to the front porch and cranked the brass doorbell.

Daisy opened the door. She wore a blue calico apron over a brown dress. A white dusting cap covered her hair. Hub saw her face register surprise. Then saw mischievousness replace the surprise and blend into a welcoming smile as a faint blush came to her cheeks.

"Hub!" she exclaimed. "I'm so glad. Did you come to see me or on business? Come in."

Hub laughed as he stepped into the hall. "Well, both, Daisy. We were all ready to start out to camp, but when we came to get the money Wayne Musgoes, the banker, said we'd have to have somebody to identify us—"

"Of course," she said and pulled him to the stairway. "Now stand right there and let Suwannee admire you while I run upstairs." She laughed; and Hub laughed, too, as he saw Suwannee scoot from behind the opened dining room door to the kitchen. "I'll be right down," Daisy said and ran up the stairs.

He knew it was going to be hard to forget this girl. She had a way of making him feel at home. And she was pretty. He noticed her graceful manner and good looks as she came down the stairs wearing a brown coat and black furs. On the front porch she whispered to him: "Is that the company's messenger?"

"Yes. His name is Springer. He and his wife live in Council Bluffs. They have a small baby."

They reached the cutter; and Springer jumped out and lifted his hat.

Hub introduced them: "Miss Swanson—Mr. Springer."

Daisy offered Springer her gloved hand. "How-do-you-do."

Springer acknowledged the introduction as he took her hand and helped her into the cutter. Hub untied the mare, got in, and took the reins. They swung around and went down the street, Daisy laughing and talking between the two men—completely gay and happy.

They left the cutter at Carsten's hitching rail and crossed to the bank. Inside they found Musgoes talking to a man and a woman at the front teller's cage. Presently he left these people and came over; and Daisy introduced Hub and Jack Springer—Mr. Musgoes—-Mr. Miller, Mr. Springer."

"Why, now," Musgoes said. "It's too much to have put you to this trouble. But it has been a privilege for me—just to see you, Daisy. We'll have the money all counted for you, Mr. Miller—and Mr. Springer—after dinner. It will take some time, you know—a sizable amount. Were you planning on leaving today?"

"Oh, yes," Springer said, frowning. "As soon as we can."

Musgoes looked at his watch. "I have only two men. One goes to dinner at twelve. Will two o'clock be all right?"

"It'll have to be," Springer answered, somewhat brusquely, "I guess."

"It will be fine," Daisy said. Smiling at Springer: "Then you and Hub can come to my house for dinner. Won't you?" She turned to Hub; and he caught the genuiness in her invitation. "You will, won't you?"

"With pleasure," Hub answered and smiled down at her. "I know it will be a good dinner, Jack."

"Now, that will work out nicely," Musgoes said as he held out his hand for the check Springer offered. "We'll have it all ready for you—in two canvas bags. I'll see you at two then. Better drive around in the alley behind the bank." He smiled —with an effort, Hub thought—and walked with them to the door, still somewhat hesitant.

AT THE cutter Springer said: "Now there are several of us know the payroll is going out today."

Daisy glanced at him as he helped her in. "Why? Who? What do you mean?"

"Besides the ones who always know about it, there's Mr. Banker, his two men, and that farmer and his wife."

Hub got in the cutter then. "But suppose they do? Musgoes isn't going to tell anyone of it—"

"If he does I hope he remembers who," Springer said.

"Why?" Daisy asked in a surprised tone.

"So we can catch them if they hold us up," Hub answered, grinning. "Jack and I want those rewards."

"Oh!" Daisy exclaimed; then waited until Hub got the cutter straightened into traffic. "I see. But that's—" She looked up at Hub beside her. "That's dangerous, isn't it? The other time—"

"This time," Springer interrupted, "it won't be Hub and I, if they try shooting again. It'll be the other side. Won't it, Hub?"

They reached the house and went in, laughing and talking. Daisy showed them into the sitting room; then left and went upstairs. When she came down she bustled into the kitchen; and Hub heard her give orders to Suwannee.

Jack Springer became interested in Swanson's books in a walnut bookcase. Hub sat down near the grate fire. He thought of what the day might hold for him; and found himself imagining he and Jack Springer had collected the rewards in full. This led to thoughts of Lonnie and Clara. It seemed they were farther away now; and he rebuked himself for having forgotten them. After all, he was interested only in his share of the posted rewards for Lonnie's sake. He must first get the money. When Lonnie was secure it would be time to think about— He stopped that line of thought as Daisy came into the room and he stood up.

Daisy Swanson would probably be married to Cortland Statler by the time he had provided for Lonnie and Clara Hobbs.

If she isn't married to Statler, he thought, *she won't be interested in a woods hand like me, anyway.*

AS THE flour mill whistle blew for the noon shutdown Wayne Musgoes rose heavily from his chair at the table in his private office. He put on his black Chesterfield and sealskin hat and opened the office door quietly. In the doorway he leaned against the frame and felt his knees tremble as he waited for old Griff to look up from his letter writing.

He knew now what he had to do and dread of it made him weak and shaky. He just could not think of it; but he knew he had to do it. *One is as bad as the other,* he thought, *but this way there's a chance, at least one.*

The half cigar he was chewing suddenly tasted bitter; and he felt sick to his stomach. He jerked the cigar from his mouth and threw it at an overloaded cuspidor near Griff's stool.

Old Griff turned his head and peered over his spectacles at Musgoes in the doorway.

Musgoes tried to control his nervousness under Griff's stare. He straightened and braced his feet—a spare man, slightly austere looking, who appeared taller and more pale in his long overcoat and tight-fitting black hat.

"Where's Tim?" Musgoes asked.

"Ain't you feeling well?"

"No. Yes. I'm all right. Where's Tim?"

Griff scowled at him. "You're looking real peaked. Maybe you ought to go up to the house and lie down a while."

"Where's Tim?" I said.

"Home to his dinner. It's twelve."

"When he comes back tell him to count out $5,000 in small coin for the Iowa Lumber Company. I'll count the rest and the paper when I come back."

Griff shook his head as he watched him walk with slow steps to the back door. "Tst, tst," Griff repeated aloud. "Going out the back way, too."

Musgoes knew he had aged in the hour since he had told Hub and Jack Springer to return at two o'clock. $15,500 in one clip! From an account he had thought would remain dormant until Marcus Swanson closed his camps. An account he had hoped would be increased by deposits when the railroads paid for Swanson's ties.

The withdrawal, in itself, would not force him to close his bank. But it would reduce the bank's cash reserve to a point where it could not pay one-tenth of its deposit liabilities. To say nothing of its banknotes in circulation and redeemable in gold and silver on demand.

He slipped on the shoveled path from the back door to the alley and strained his back muscles. Now his chest felt as if giant hands gripped it. He leaned against the hitching rail at the alley and got his breath. *Will this thing kill me?* he wondered.

Townspeople knew he was friendly with Cortland Statler and took his law business to him. He often walked from the bank's front door directly to the law office stairway. Yet now he left the alley, went to Fourth Street and crossed it almost furtively. At Statler's stairway entrance he looked up and down the street before ducking in. All this much as if he had been headed toward a back street saloon for a drink during banking hours.

His feet dragged on the stairs; and he paused at the waiting room door for breath. Then he opened the door part way; and was tempted to shut it and leave. But Frank Wilkes saw him; came out and peered at his gray face in dim light of the hall.

"Tell Cort to let me in, Frank," Musgoes whispered hoarsely. "Soon's he can. Is he in? Who's in there?"

"He's in his private office," Wilkes said, frowning. "There's only three in the waiting room. I'm drawing a deed for them while they wait."

MUSGOES went down the hall to the library door and rattled the knob. Soon he heard quick steps and Statler jerked open the door.

"Hello, Wayne. What's the matter? For God's sake, man, are you sick?"

Without answering Musgoes walked past him and into Statler's private office. He dropped into a leather-cushioned rocker near Statler's ornate rolltop desk. Then sighed and slapped his hands on the chair arms and stared at a picture of Justice Marshall on the wall across from him.

Statler came in and sat down at the desk. Something was wrong or Musgoes would not have come during the noon hour. But something was wrong all the time. He was used to it. More from curiosity than fear he prepared himself to hear whatever it was, hoping it did not relate to his own affairs. But Musgoes said nothing—nothing at all.

Statler leaned back in his swivel chair; centered his green eyes on Musgoes. "Well?" he drawled.

Musgoes turned his face to him and Statler saw the haggard, furtive look in his eyes.

"What's the matter, Wayne? You look like hell."

"I came over—"

"Not to ask me again to pay my notes? I told you I can't."

"I want your straight note for that four thousand you owe me and interest and I want to keep those bonds."

"You want what? Say that again."

"Listen, Cort, the Iowa Lumber Company's messenger, Springer, and Swanson's man, Miller, are in town with a payroll check on my bank for $15,500."

"Huh-huh!" Statler exclaimed; and thought: *So that's what Miller is up to.* "Is the check good?" he casually asked.

"It's good for twice that," Musgoes answered. "On my books."

"On your books! What do you mean? Cash it then."

"I've got to cash it at two o'clock. If I don't my bank is closed."

"What's my measly little $4,000 got to do with that?"

Musgoes stood up and took off his coat and hat. He threw both on a leather couch and wiped his forehead with a white handkerchief. "Christ, it's hot in here! Open a window and shut off that damn stove out there. If you're expecting anyone let 'em wait. Give me a drink, will you?"

Statler smiled cynically. "For a banker and one of the trustees of the Methodist church you surprise me, Wayne."

HE STOOD up and shut the door into the library. Then walked leisurely into his bedroom and opened a window. When he came back he placed a quart bottle half full of whiskey and a glass on the desk.

"There," he said, "have your drink and get yourself in hand. You're as white as the driven snow and shaking."

Musgoes poured a four-finger drink and drank it; then clapped his hand to his chest and coughed. "Water," he gasped huskily.

Statler went in his bedroom and got a jug from the window sill and poured a glass of water which he handed to Musgoes. Then he sat down at his desk and hooked his thumbs in his vest. He was accustomed to hearing trouble; and he knew he was to hear trouble now. But his own multitude of worries gnawed at him; and he scowled impatiently as he thought of a few.

"You," he said, "the smartest banker in these parts, worrying over a check for $15,500. What have my two notes of two thousand each got to do with it?"

"Cort—" Musgoes leaned forward, a look of anguish on his thin face—"Cort," he repeated huskily, "I've got to get that $15,500 of cash back. I've got to have your straight note for $4,000 and the interest you owe. And those bonds must come off my collateral list and go into my bond account. I expect a government man next week. They're in Council Bluffs now. I haven't cash enough. If a run should start—I'm—"

"You're what?"

"Ruined!" Musgoes screamed.

"Oh, twaddle!" Statler snorted; and contempt registered on his face. "Close your damn bank," he said with a bravado he did not feel. "They're all busted anyway."

Statler had always been jealous of Musgoes and his wealth; and thought of Musgoes close to ruin was acceptable. "Ruined! What do you mean?" he asked.

"And you'll be ruined, too, Cort. I know those six government bonds aren't yours."

"So what about it? You knew it when you took 'em as collateral. Where'll you be if that gets out?"

Musgoes' chin trembled. "That last $2,000 you paid me—I know where it came from. It was marked money. I had a telegram from Council Bluffs to watch for it. You came in with it the day after Marcus Swanson's last payroll was held up by somebody."

Statler had not expected this, but he was too wary, too good an actor to let the shock it gave him show. He felt his anger rising. This damn banker was not going to dictate to him.

"That so?" he said carelessly. "I won it at Jipp Grinsted's Blazing Stump the night before I paid it. If gambling's a club, you can wield it, Wayne. But now I want a club over you. How much have you, ah—misapplied, to be polite, of the funds your unsuspecting depositors have entrusted to your loving care. Tell me that and maybe I'll be in better mood to hear the rest of your story."

Musgoes let his breath out in a great sigh. "It's about eighteen thousand dollars, Cort."

Statler jumped. "What! Short that much? Good God! And I thought you're rich. I thought you were—well, honest—"

"I'm only human—"

"It's a cinch you aren't Christ. How'd you get in that shape? Is that all?"

MUSGOES slowly nodded, his eyes on the figured blue carpet. "That's the amount I'm worrying about right now."

"Ouch!" Statler exclaimed. "And just yesterday you were telling me I must pay my debts." Now he brought his hands down and put his fingertips together. "You say you want my straight note for what I owe and then you'll switch the bonds into—assets. Do I get my collateral note back?"

"Of course," Musgoes answered wearily.

"That's $6,000 of help for you. The face of the bonds. Where's the rest?"

"There's $15,500 in the check to show against deposits when I pay it."

"If you pay it that will reduce your cash $15,500, too. Where's the rest, Wayne?"

"It'll be on the road to Swanson's camps this afternoon. In cash! Less what we have to pay to get it."

Faint color showed in Musgoes' sallow cheeks as he met Statler's eyes. He pulled his handkerchief from his hip pocket and nervously patted his forehead. "That makes $21,500. Cort—less what you have to pay for help to get it."

"I hope you realize you are asking me to become an accessory to highway robbery. Do you?"

Musgoes did not answer.

"Well, what do I get out of it and when?" Statler asked.

"After the government man has come and gone—Mrs. Kelsey's six government bonds."

"What else?"

Musgoes shook his head with slow finality.

"Listen, Wayne, you're in no position to dictate terms to me in this."

"I'm a desperate man, Cort."

"You must be. But I'm not. Not that much. It'll cost $3,000. That leaves $12,500 for your bank. Out of that my note is to be paid. The balance is to be divided between you and me; and I get Mrs.—the bonds."

Musgoes digested this—frowning, writhing. Statler watched him and smiled faintly as he saw him writhe.

"Take it or leave it, Wayne."

Musgoes groaned. "All right. But it's part of the deal I retain everything until the government man has been here and gone."

"Provided he gets here next week," Statler said in a matter-of-fact tone; and saw Musgoes nod assent. "You keep it all for a week. Except the boys' share. They'll want that at once. Then what? This will keep you out of jail for awhile. But after we split the haul and I pull out my bonds and you don't have my note, you'll still be plenty short."

"The government may not be around for another six months."

"In the meantime?"

"I can't think that far ahead. Maybe something will turn up. Banknotes may be redeemed. The market may go at anytime—"

He stopped as he saw Statler shake his head and look at his watch.

"Nearly one," Statler said. "What time did you say you expect to cash this check?"

"Two," Musgoes answered wearily.

"And they'll go right out with the money?"

"I suppose so."

"You'd better find out and delay them until half past three or four."

"How?"

"Wayne, that's your problem. Meet me

at three at Jipp Grinsted's Blazing Stump in the back card room. We'll get down to brass tacks there."

Musgoes stood up and put on his hat and fussed with it. He got clumsily into his overcoat and slowly buttoned it. "Do you think—" he started, but Statler jumped from his chair and Musgoes stopped.

"Yes," Statler said, "I think. But we'll talk out there."

Without another word Musgoes turned and walked to the library door. The weight of this thing was almost too much for him. He knew of nothing he could say to make it lighter.

Statler let him out and locked the door. As he returned to his private office his handsome face relaxed; and he sat down at his desk and indulged in one of his rare genuine smiles.

CHAPTER XVI

HUB and Jack Springer said goodbye to Daisy at two o'clock and drove directly to the alley which ran past the rear of Wayne Musgoes' bank. Hub rattled the doorknob of the back door; and old Griff came to the windows of Musgoes' private office and peered over foggy spectacles to see who it was before he let them in.

To keep away from customers at the teller's cage in the center of the counting room Hub went to the counter before the vault. Jack Springer and Griff came up beside him.

Hub turned to Griff. "Where's Mr. Musgoes?"

"Home, sick," Griff answered. "He didn't feel well this morning. Went home this noon. He's got half a hog and a crock of head cheese coming in from his farm for Marcus Swanson. I was to tell you to wait and take it along."

"But the money! Isn't that ready?" Springer asked.

"All ready," Griff answered and moved in behind the counter, "All ready. You can leave it here until you come back at half past three or four for the pork—all of it goes."

"Half past three or four!" Hub exclaimed impatiently. "It'll be only a short time until dark then. We've got to go way out to camp."

Jack Springer nudged him and whispered: "Let's wait. We'll use the time to mark the money."

"All right," Hub announced for Griff's benefit. "We'll be back and get the hog between half past three and four, but we'll take the money with us now."

"Think it best?" Griff went in the vault and came out with a canvas money bag in each hand. "Gold is heavy," he grunted and clumped the bags on the counter. "It's all there—half eagles, eagles, double eagles, and silver and treasury notes. A few banknotes, but no greenbacks. You want to count it?"

"No, I guess not," Springer said and picked up a bag. "Come on, Hub."

Griff went to the back door with them. "You got room for that side of pork in your cutter, boys?"

"I think so," Hub answered. "If we haven't we'll tie it behind the box."

"Don't forget to stop back now," Griff called. "Mr. Musgoes, he wants especially Marcus Swanson should have the meat before the weather warms up."

As they got in the cutter Hub asked Springer: "Where are you planning on marking this money?"

"Swanson's. If you ask me I think it's some kind of a stall—Musgoes being sick and giving Swanson half a hog."

Hub laughed. "You aren't imagining anything, are you? He's one of the town's leading citizens."

"That's all right. So was Boss Tweed one of New York's until three years ago when they found his gang had gotten away with a hundred million."

They left the alley and turned right into traffic on Fourth Street. At Swanson's house Daisy came to the front porch as Hub got out to tie the horse.

"What's the trouble?" she called.

"We've come for another of your roast beef dinners," Springer answered pleasantly and started up the walk, a bag of money under each arm. "I'll have to tell my wife about that wonderful dinner when I get home, Miss Swanson."

Hub joined them on the porch and they went in the house.

In the hall Hub said, "We'd be on our way, but Wayne Musgoes left orders we were to wait for a half pig to take to your father."

Daisy's smiling expression changed to a puzzled one. "He gives Father a pig from his farm this time of year. But he always has the team stop for it. He didn't need to bother you."

Hub explained what they wanted to do as they took off their coats. They went to the kitchen; untied the strings of the money bags and dumped rolls of paper-covered coins and packages of paper money on the table near the back windows. Suwannee's eyes grew large as she saw the sizable pile.

"Law! Is that all money?"

HUB laughed. "It surely is, Suwannee. Now you can get a flatiron and we'll fix it here on the table for an anvil."

They rigged a flatiron on the table. Daisy found her father's cold chisel and a hammer. Suwannee held coins while Hub put a small nick in the edge of each of them. Daisy brought pens and ink; and she and Springer initialed *MS* in the left hand upper corner of each bill.

Hub found it pleasant in this clean and homey kitchen, fragrant with the odor of fresh-baked bread and cookies. The light of mid-afternoon came in through curtained windows. A fire of slabwood crackled in the kitchen range near Daisy and Springer who sat at a small serving table. Daisy asked an occasional question; Suwannee gasped as she unwrapped each roll of coins carefully.

They managed to mark all the bills and coins by the time the clock in the hall struck half past three. Daisy set out cookies and a pitcher of milk; and the clock had intoned four when they put on their coats. Springer went to the cutter and stowed the two bags of money under the seat.

"Well, goodbye, Hub," Daisy said as he hesitated in the hall. "I suppose I won't see you again until Father closes his camps."

She held out her hand and he took it. He felt her radiant friendliness; and he found her hard to resist. "I hope I'll see you again, Daisy," he said. "If we get held up we'll be back. I may come anyway."

"Oh, you won't be held up. No one knows you have the money, except Suwannee and—"

"You and Wayne Musgoes."

She laughed. "Well he won't tell."

Hub turned the doorknob then; and now he wished he were to see her often. She seemed to be waiting for him to say more than goodbye. But for the life of him he could think of nothing to say.

She saw his embarrassment and said mischievously: "Ask it and I'll say yes."

"Ask what?"

"If you may come and call on me, silly."

"That's what I had in mind, Daisy. But when I'm through work here I'll need to begin thinking what I'm going to do about my brother."

"I wish you didn't have to be so much that way. Bound by duty, I mean—"

Jack Springer whistled then; and Hub opened the door. "Well, goodbye." He saw her look up at him and smile. "Perhaps I'll be seeing you again."

He went down the walk and untied the horse. As the cutter swung around in front of the house both men waved to Daisy, who came out on the porch, hugging herself against the cold, and watched them until they reached the corner and rounded it.

THEY drove to the alley and tied the horse at the rail in back of Musgoes' bank. Griff had the side of pork and jar of headcheese ready. Griff found a length of rope and they tied the pig behind the cutter's box.

"So Musgoes will see it and know it's us," Springer whispered to Hub.

As Griff went back in the bank Hub said, "Jack, we'll load that shotgun and rifle now. Then we'll flip a coin to see who rides guard. If there's shooting the guard would be first to get it."

He loaded Swanson's Winchester with fifteen cartridges in the magazine and one in the chamber; and put ten rifle cartridges and five shotgun shells in his inside coat pocket. Then he loaded the ten gauge shotgun.

"Now," he said and took a silver dollar from his pocket, "you flip that in your hat. If it turns up heads, I drive. If it's tails, you do."

Springer tossed the dollar and caught it in his black hat. "It's heads." He grinned at Hub. "You drive."

Hub looked in the hat. "It is not. It's tails. You drive." He shucked out of his buffalo coat. "Put that on and get over there and drive. I'll take the shotgun and get under the robe. We're not going to be stopped anyway."

"Don't be too sure of that," Springer said as he put on the coat. He got in the cutter and tucked the rifle barrel between his knees. "If we are I hope we get one of 'em, at least."

Hub untied the mare. In the cutter he pulled the bearskin robe around him and rested the shotgun barrels against the dashboard with his legs holding the stock. Springer spoke to the mare; and she stepped out smartly as if she knew they were headed for camp.

First signs of dusk came as they passed the Blazing Stump. Distant timber made splotches of black and gray on a canvas of dull skies; and they faced a hint of storm as the cutter swung north and left the main highway.

"What do you plan on doing if we get held up?" Hub asked. "Try to get them when they're leaving?"

"If they have the drop on us that's all we can do, or get shot. We might try jumping for cover and let the horse go. She'll tear out for home. If they miss us, we can shoot it out in hopes we can get one or two." He laughed and added: "If they don't get us."

They came to hilly wooded country where the road dipped past high sloping banks and great rocks; and Springer said, "This would be a good place. It's getting dusk, too. I can't get it out of my head that Musgoes delayed us on purpose—Heigh! Look out!" he called sharply and pulled back on the reins.

Hub saw a rider dash across the road seventy-five yards ahead. "This is it! That cuss had a rope." He grabbed the shotgun and, as he cocked the hammers, jerked around and looked back. "Another one! They've roped us in, Jack. Now, how in hell did they know?"

SPRINGER had the reins in his left hand; the rifle in his right. "That banker, I tell you," he said in an even tone. He stood up as the horse stopped. "Come on, let's—Huh-ah-h, h!"

Hub had heard the *thwack* of the bullet as it hit Jack Springer in the back at the instant he heard the *wha-ap* of the report above and behind him on his right; it shocked him.

The startled horse plunged; and Jack Springer collapsed, doubled up, in the cutter. Hub grabbed the reins in time to stop the horse before she hit a taut rope across the road. He saw he was between two sloping banks strewn with large rocks among a sparse growth of oaks; and knew the bandits would be above him on the slopes.

"What the helldya do that for?" he heard a voice call behind him on his left. "You damn fool!"

"Get out, guard," a man called from the slope to the right. "Out! Quick! With your hands up. Keep those reins and get the bit of that horse. We're coming down behind you, but you're covered. Quick now, or you get what he did."

Hub knew they had at least one rifle trained on him. A man could easily shoot him from behind on either side. There was nothing to do but obey. He spoke to the frightened horse, trying to calm her as he got out of the cutter and moved to her head. He felt his knees shake and knew he was fearful a nervous finger might touch a trigger and end it for him. Glancing around quickly he saw three men with handkerchiefs over their faces move down the rocky slope to his right.

A heavy set masked rider moved up from behind. "Face around, fellow." He raised his rifle. "And stay that way."

Hub heard them behind him at the cutter now. Heard them pump shells out of the Winchester and saw it tossed past him into brush beside the road. He heard men on foot climb up the bank on his right and knew the mounted guard would wait.

Now he heard heavy movement in the brush; then the shoes of a horse strike stone; and he swung around. The shotgun lay in snow beside the road. He retrieved it quickly, broke it, and, as he dashed up the slope, blew through the barrels to clear them of snow which might make the barrels burst. He slipped in two shells, closed the gun, and cocked both hammers as he gained the top of the rise.

Two riders showed in a large clearing seventy-five or a hundred yards ahead; and he fired both barrels at them. A brown horse reared out from behind a rock sixty yards or so on his right, the rider running beside the horse and trying for the saddle. Hub broke the shotgun, jerked the empty brass shells out and jammed in two loaded ones.

The horseman—moving with the horse, his hand on the saddle horn—got his foot in the stirrup and threw his right leg high over the plunging horse as Hub fired the first barrel.

He saw the horse jump and the rider crouch down on the horse. Hub fired the second barrel, but could not tell if either horse or rider had been hit by the spreading charges of buckshot.

HE RAN down the slope; got the rifle; worked the lever; and blew hard into the breech to get snow out of the barrel. Then dashed up the slope again, cramming cartridges into the magazine as he gained the top. He ran across the clearing and up another slope. Far to his right he saw open country; and levered a cartridge into the rifle's chamber. A rider came out of brush into this open country. Hub, out of breath, tried to steady down for a long shot.

He saw four more riders break out of the brush and the five now lined up closely together. They made a good mark for a lucky shot, but the light had faded and the range was too great for accurate shooting. He tried a quick shot on a coarse bead, but could not tell where the ball went. Then he saw the horsemen bear left toward cover—so, he reasoned, they must have heard the whine of the bullet and he had shot high.

Quickly he fired two shots on a flat sight and saw a spurt of snow behind the horses, That kind of shooting, he knew, was useless; and he held down now to a calculated sight. The range was at least three hundred yards, he figured. Though the rifle would carry that far with killing effect, the heavy bullet would drop before it got there. He had heard the new Winchester held up well, but had no idea of the flatness of its trajectory. He let all the high Rocky Mountain front sight and an inch of the barrel show, got the tip of the bead on a horse's neck, kept the gun moving; and sensed this would be a hit. The rider would go tumbling off.

Confidently he squeezed his right hand. And now he swore as he heard the hammer snap on an empty chamber.

Angrily, hurriedly he got the rest of his rifle cartridges into the magazine and worked the lever. The five riders were close to a half mile away, he estimated, and indistinct against distant timber in dim light. He hardly saw them over the sights, but held high and pumped lead at them until the arm was empty and the barrel was like a furnace.

Now he saw the riders disappear in timber; and swore loudly. All five had made a clean getaway, apparently unharmed, unless he had nicked one. They had Marcus Swanson's payroll. He had failed. He stood there and let the weight of it bear down on him. And then he remembered Jack Springer.

He ran down the slope to the first rise and over it to the road. The mare browsed twigs from roadside bushes. Hub straightened Jack Springer on the cutter seat. Opening the buffalo coat, he ran his hand inside Springer's vest to his shirt and felt wetness. He pulled his hand out and saw blood; and swore again. The bullet had gone through from back to chest and out. He felt of Springer's hand and found it cold. No use to feel for a pulse, for now he saw the blue eyes—death showed all too plainly in their dull glaze.

HE GOT Springer out of the buffalo coat and wiped blood from it with his handkerchief. Then put the coat on and wrapped Springer in the bearskin robe. The rifle and shotgun he put under the cutter seat; and debated whether or not to throw the side of pork away, but decided to take it with him.

He walked ahead and untied the rope the bandits had stretched across the road; then drove to the one they had run across to shut off escape at the rear. These two hemp ropes held no clue, but he coiled them and stowed both in the cutter.

Then—boiling with rage—he got in the cutter, picked up the reins and started the mare toward Sioux City.

He would have to attend to Jack Springer and figure out a plan as best he could. Both tasks were unpleasant; and he brooded over them in his anger as the cutter slipped along. The five horsemen would undoubtedly separate; then come together. He knew of no likely place for them to meet unless it were the Blazing Stump—where else but it?

But what could he discover there? He thought back over the shooting he had done; and now he remembered the first shot with the shotgun at the lone bandit. The fellow's horse had jumped. Might have been hit. Blood might show on the snow.

He swung the mare around and let her take her stride, for it was getting dark. At the scene of the holdup, he tied the horse to a tree and went up the slope. He found his tracks in snow; then one of the brass shotgun shells he had fired. Farther on he found tracks of a horse and those of a man; and looked closely for drops of blood. A small dark object in the snow caught his eye. He picked it up and saw it was the heel of a boot.

He looked for blood again, but found none. And now he examined the boot heel and saw the mark a buckshot had left in it where the heel had been fastened to the boot. Perhaps, he concluded, the heel, not the buckshot, had hit the horse and made the horse jump.

He went back to the cutter, got in, and started the mare toward town. He knew that if Jack Springer were alive he would insist Wayne Musgoes had been one of the five bandits. Though it was almost unbelievable that Sioux City's leading banker had been in a holdup, he decided to go to the bank and see if Musgoes were there or had been there.

Darkness had come and street lights were lighted when he reached town. He drove to Palmer's furniture and undertaking store and tied the horse. Inside the store he introduced himself to Palmer and told him what had happened. Palmer had heard similar stories; he did not seem much impressed. Only smoothed his whiskers and nodded his head. Hub wrote down Jack Springer's home address; and Palmer promised to take the remains to Council Bluffs and notify the widow.

HUB knew the full weight of sadness as he drove to the alley at the rear of Musgoes' bank and tied the mare. A light shown through drawn shades at the bank's back windows. He went up the path and looked in past shades, but saw no one. He walked to the side street and looked in side windows of the bank. A lamp burned on the counter in front of the vault; and he saw that its light shown through the open office doorway.

He crossed the street and looked up at Cortland Statler's office windows and saw no light at all. He stopped a pedestrian and inquired the location on Third Street of Musgoes' residence. The distance was short; he walked it in a few minutes and knew the house was on the northwest corner and by the red barn.

The drive was shoveled free of snow; and he saw no tracks and no signs of snow from horseshoes on the stable approach.

He opened the stable door and sidled in. A horse pawed in a stall; and he spoke softly to the horse as he felt of its rump. He lighted a match and saw the horse look around as he examined its back for saddle signs. This horse was not saddle broken he concluded. He struck another match and saw the stable had two stalls. The empty stall had been used lately. It could be Musgoes was away on horseback; but he knew that proved nothing. It would take a lot more than that.

He went out and shut the door and moved around the rear of the house. An old woman fussed at a table in the kitchen; and he saw her walk into the lighted dining room, carrying a plate. Evidently she expected someone for supper. Undoubtedly Musgoes.

Nothing was to be gained here he decided; and walked slowly back to the alley and got in the cutter and drove to the hotel stables. He gave the stableman strict orders about feeding and watering the mare and told him to hang the side of pork in the woodshed.

In the hotel he registered and asked for the room he had vacated that morning. Tired, he stretched out on the bed in darkness. Supper odors came from the dining room, but the thought of food was unpleasant. His mind turned to Daisy; and then he thought of Lonnie and Clara. These thoughts, in his mood, made him more blue. He thought of Jack Springer and his young widow and their baby; and his anger increased.

The whole mess seemed a hopeless one Ways in which it could have been avoided besieged him. If he had faced around as they came to the scene of the holdup. If he had put one more cartridge in the Winchester for those first shots at the fleeing horsemen. If he and Jack Springer had not waited for the pork. *If we hadn't waited for the pork.*

Now he remembered old Griff had said Musgoes was home sick at noon. Why wasn't he home now? And Daisy had said Musgoes always sent his present of half a pig to Swanson by the camp team. The banker was the only person, except the bank clerks and Daisy, who knew the money was going out. Incredible, of course. Yet, in these times—

He jumped from the bed, went downstairs, and told the clerk he would be gone for awhile. In the stable he gave the night man a dollar to put the shotgun, rifle, and packsack in his room and take the pork to MacLaren's store to be picked up by the camp team.

A LONE horse and cutter stood at the hitching rail before the main door of the Blazing Stump as he turned the unwilling mare into the yard. While he tied the horse at the end of the rail he saw the building as a large, square, two-story structure with a narrow porch under a sagging roof. He walked to the rear of the house and heard voices which came from a lighted room on the first floor.

Now he walked past a woodpile and sheds to the barn and opened the service door. A lantern showed on a shelf near the harness rack and he lighted it. In the stables he saw two cutters and several covered buggies and horse stalls beyond them. At the row of stalls he counted seven horses—three of which were unsaddled and eating. He felt of the rump of the first saddle horse and found it normally warm. Then he looked at the others. Saw they were not eating. Felt of the rump and belly of one. This horse was heated beyond good sense.

He moved into the stall and felt of the animal's mane and found it damp. He held the lantern to the horse's withers and saw foam stains on black hair. A rifle boot hung at the saddle. He jerked the rifle out; saw it was a Spencer single shot carbine; and smelled of the muzzle. But got no odor except that of cold steel.

The next horse was hot and heaving slightly. Hub pulled a rifle from the boot and smelled of the rifle's muzzle. He jerked alert as he caught the pungent, acrid odor of burned powder. This rifle had been fire recently. This horse had been ridden hard—pushed to its limit.

The last of the three saddled horses carried a rifle boot but no rifle. The animal had been ridden recently and hard.

Hub went back in the harness room and put out the lantern.

The spent horses, the rifles, the odor of recently fired powder all might mean something; and all might not. Many men rode the highways with rifles in boots at their saddles. Hunters, plainsmen, cattlemen, scouts, agents of speculators and the government, travelers. Even in winter they came and went. To and from the Territory and country west of the Missouri. Some on legitimate business; some on questionable. Others on the Devil's business, or no business at all. And they rode hard at times, fired rifles, and stopped at gambling dens and questionable roadhouses.

Only one thing was certain—the men who had ridden the three spent horses were inside the Blazing Stump. He would have a look at them.

CHAPTER XVII

THE barroom of the Blazing Stump had looked large to Hub in November, but now, in the light from six ornate hanging oil lamps, he saw it as a monstrous square room. An oak bar ran along the wall at his left forty feet to the main entrance near the far corner. Close to the end of the bar nearest him stood a castiron safe. A wide hall ran into darkness at the side of the house on his right; and a woodburning stove glowed in the center of the room.

The house croupier, whose dark face was lined with the nervous marks of his trade, dozed beside a card table near windows where a roulette wheel and gambling devices occupied the far end of the room. He wore a gun at his hip; and shifted it as he settled farther down in his chair. A girl Hub recognized as the blonde percentage girl he and Lonnie had talked to helped a ponderous bartender arrange bottles and glasses on the back bar before a mirror which was decorated with paintings of nude women.

The girl saw Hub and called: "Hello handsome. You came back, didn't you?"

Hub advanced to the bar and clinked a five dollar gold piece on it. "You people have what you want. I don't feel like anything."

The girl came around the bar and edged up to Hub. "Don't you remember me—Rose?"

"Yes, of course, I remember you."

"This is Mr. Hennessey," Rose said, indicating the bartender, "Dope Hennessey."

Dope smoothed his handlebar mustache; then screwed his red face into a smile as he put out a moist hand; and Hub shook hands with him.

"He's the night man," Rose explained. "When you were here last fall it was afternoon. Where's your partner? That little fellow was with you last time—you know who I mean?"

"He's away."

Dope motioned to the croupier; and the croupier came to the bar for his drink, silent, his thin face as expressionless as a mummy's. Dope smoothed his oily black hair on each side of its center part and held a box of cigars over the bar, extending it to Hub.

"Cigar?" he asked Hub; and Hub took one.

Rose openly admired Hub. She had a round, sallow face which retained hints of the prettiness she had lost. Her large blue eyes were deceptively frank. Eyes and blonde curls gave her a china doll look of innocence, but the hard stamp of the life she led was on her.

"You've come up in the world, ain't you, big fellow?" she asked Hub. "Did you come just to see me?"

Caution dictated that he evade their questions, but his anger demanded action. "I'm looking for men," he boldly stated.

"Who, if it's all right for me to ask?" Rose purred, at his elbow now, her hand stroking the sleeve of his buffalo coat.

"The three came in on those spent horses in the barn."

The croupier coughed and bumped down his glass. Dope curled his mustache points and gazed at the smoke-stained ceiling.

"They're in a room down that hall," Hub said. "Who are they?"

Rose laughed hoarsely. "Ask us no questions and we'll tell you no lies."

Dope eased his belly against the bar with a sigh. "We just work here. Might be friends of Jipp's. How should we know, Mister—what did you say your name is?"

"I didn't say. Call me Hub."

"Come on, buy me a bottle of wine," Rose urged petulantly. "Then I can sit down and talk."

"All right," Hub said.

HE TOOK off his buffalo coat and sat down at a card table where he could see the hall opening and the front and back doors. Rose came with her wine and glass. Hub looked at her closely. The good looks of her teens had hardened into the coarseness of her late twenties; and the lines of her once trim figure were loose and flabby from drinking and lack of exercise.

"If you didn't come to see me and you won't drink, what'd you come for?" she asked. "Gambling? Later, maybe?"

"I want to see who the men are in that back room."

Rose narrowed her eyes and shook her head slowly.

Hub asked, "Do you know a man named Bart Sweeney?"

She toyed with the wine bottle as she shook her head. "Ask Jipp Grinstead your questions when he comes out."

"All right," Hub agreed. "I can wait."

He saw Dope Hennessey whisper to the croupier. The croupier crossed to the dark hall. Hub took his colt from his holster and put it on the shelf of a compartment under the table corner used by card players for their glasses.

"Do you stay here all the time?" he asked.

"I've a room at the end of the hall. I do the cooking for 'em, too. I'm tired of it. I wish I could get out of here."

"Why don't you?"

She shrugged. "He'd kill me." She leaned toward Hub. "Take me to Chicago."

"I'm not going there."

"Take me any where. I sleep in the bedroom at the northwest corner. If you've a sleigh you could drive to my window any time after three and—" She stopped as she saw Hub shake his head.

"No, I guess not," he said.

Men came in now and grouped at the bar. The croupier was back at his roulette wheel, whirling it in anticipation of business. A bearded man came over and brought fifty dollars worth of chips; and Hub heard the wheel spin. Rose strolled to the bar, swaying her hips, pouting like any dismissed girl.

The barroom grew busier. Card games started. Rose came back to Hub's table. They talked; and she sipped her wine.

Finally Hub looked at his watch and saw it was eleven o'clock.

"It's early," Rose said. "How long are you going to sit here?"

"Until I see those men in the back room come out."

"Do you want anything to eat?"

He shook his head; and then he saw the dark-faced man who had been at the roulette wheel last autumn swing from the hall entrance and come this way, walking with heavey flat-footed steps.

"That's Jipp," Rose whispered. "Be careful now."

Jipp Grinstead stopped before Hub; and his wide shoulders and long arms gave him an apelike appearance as he braced his feet and glared blackly. Oily skin on his low forehead wrinkled as he frowned. A red scar ran down from his right eye to his mouth and pulled it into a leer as he tried to smile.

"What you want, my friend?" he asked.

"I want to see who those men in the back room are."

"What for?"

"That's my business, Grinstead."

JIPP GRINSTEAD hesitated; then swung around and went back into the hall, the click of his boot heels on bare pine audible above the talk his presence had hushed.

"He don't like that," Rose whispered. "He's a bad one. Why don't you go?"

"I'm going to sit here until they come out."

At midnight the room held coarse and profane talk of gambling and drinking men. A second bartender helped Dope Hennessey. Barboys and busboys had appeared and were busy with orders. Rose had left the room. Hub saw another girl at the bar and recognized her as the brunette he and Lonnie had seen last fall. The crowd thinned out in another hour and Hub saw Jipp Grinstead move in and go to the bar right away.

Rose returned to Hub's table. "See your men?" she asked. "Jipp said they left."

"No, they didn't," Hub said positively. "I've seen every man who went down that hall; and I've marked over one who came out."

Grinstead came over, his dark face glistening. "You'll have to go, friend."

Hub moved his hand under the table to the Colt. "I'm staying until I get ready to leave."

"Get out of here!" Grinstead roared. "Or I'll—" He flipped back his long coat and rested his hand on the butt of a pearl-handled gun at his hip. "I'm closing now."

Hub swung the Colt up and over the table. "I wouldn't if I were you. I'm staying until I see who your friends in that back room are."

Grinstead attempted a smile. "All right." He took his hand from his gun and poked his fingers into a pocket of his silk vest. "You're a stubborn cuss. Damn me, but I like that. You'll have a drink with me?"

Hub put his gun in its holster. "No thanks."

Grinstead motioned to the second bartender. "Champagne," he called and held up three fingers.

Hub heard a cork pop. The bartender called a barboy; and the barboy brought a tray and three filled champagne glasses to Grinstead, who turned and took it from him.

Grinstead put the tray on the table. "There," he said and placed a glass of champagne before Hub, "you'll like that." He sat down. "As long as you're staying until sunup we might as well be friends. Drink hearty."

Grinstead raised his glass and waited for Hub and Rose to raise theirs. As Hub took his he saw Rose watching him closely. He drank half the champagne in his glass. And now Rose narrowed her eyes over her glass; and he felt her foot move over under the table and press down on his toes.

"I'll have to leave you," Grinstead said and stood up. "Stay as long as you want, friend."

HE WHISPERED a few words to the croupier at the roulette wheel as he passed him; then disappeaed in the hall entarnce.

The barboy came with a pail of ice and the champagne bottle.

Hub raised his glass; and now he felt Rose kick his leg under the table.

"What's the matter?" he asked; and then he knew.

Hastily he put down the glass. As the barboy left he heard Rose; and she sounded far away: "Don't drink . . . knockout drops—"

He tried to stand but felt silly weakness. Suddenly he saw blackness only; and he felt himself fall forward on the table. Then all consciousness left.

Swanson's mare halted her swift pace at the tracks and tossed her head—twin puffs of frozen vapor coming from her nostrils. Her keen nose had smelled water as she reached the railway near Hobb's. She jerked the cutter over the filling and plunged into thin brush along the roadbed for a drink before running the last mile to Swanson's camps and her stall; and her plunging threw Hub farther down in the cutter seat.

Saplings cracked; cedar brushes slapped the cutter. A dead branch from a dying tamarack fell across the dashboard when the mare pulled the cutter under the tree as she shoved her nose into a bubbling swamp pool and sucked thirstily.

Hub regained consciousness as quickly as he had lost it; and was surprised to find he had no headache. His brain was clear and he knew what had happened. Angry in his sorrow after the holdup over Jack Springer's death, he knew cold rage now. Jipp Grinstead had tricked him, but he blamed himself for getting into the trap. Undoubtedly when he passed out the croupier and Dope Hennessey had carried him to the cutter for the mare to transport wherever she went.

He threw back the bearskin robe and his buffalo coat, which were over him, and sat up. Reached in his vest pocket for his watch and a match. The watch was gone. It had been his grandfather's key winder; and he cherished it. Quickly he felt for his gun and found it and cartridge belt missing. The wallet he carried in his left hip pocket held all his money, Marcus Swanson's letter of credit, and Clara Hobb's picture. He knew before he had squirmed around and reached for it that this was gone, too.

THE cutthroat rolled me! And he swore mentally as the thought came. Damn him, I'll kill him!

The mare had finished her drink and was nosing snow-covered grass tufts. He grabbed the reins and jerked her back and around. At the filling he saw a clump of white birches down the tracks in coming light and knew where he was to a certainty.

Boiling mad now, he tossed aside the chance to run in to camp and see Swanson and made the unwilling mare go east. He held her to a walk for awhile, despite his haste, for he knew she had a stomach full of cold water. Dawn moved in slowly and grayly as he hit the highway. A crow crossed over low mists drifting across open country on his left, cawing raucously. Above black tops of timber he saw a horned owl laboring home from its night hunting—great wings flapping like elephant's ears as the bird dropped ghost like into a big oak tree to one side.

Daylight, coldly silent, pulled the night's curtains from a dark sky; and a whining wind came out of the northwest as he stopped the horse near the hitching rail at the Blazing Stump.

He remembered Rose had said she slept in a room at the northwest corner of this silent and somber gray house. He drove cautiously around the big square building and saw no horses. Listening he caught the stomping of those in the barn. A blind rattled at a frosty window on the second floor, but he heard no voices and saw no lights while he waited—alert, but making his plans.

Now he drove to the northwest corner of the house and got the cutter directly under a west window. Reins in hand he got out and tied a hitching strap tightly around the mare's front legs at the pasterns so she could move.

Then he took off his overcoat and suit coat, put on a pair of heavy cloth gloves, pulled his hat tighter on his head, and stood on the cutter seat. He found the window sill was nearly even with his waistline; and tried to look through the frosted pane, but could not see inside. The window was up about an inch, held there by a flat bottle on the sill. He put his fingers under the sash bar and carefully raised the sash as far as it would go. And now he found the window must lack pins and would not stay up. He got out his jackknife and managed to open a blade and drive it into the frame to hold the window while he boosted himself up and over the sill through the window.

In the room, by dim light, he saw a bed, dresser, and the clothes and trifles of a woman. He swung around to the bed in a corner and saw a huddled form under blankets and knew it was Rose by the blonde hair on the pillow.

She whispered: "Hello Hub. I thought you might come back; and I've been awake, waiting. You don't think I had anything to do with getting you doped, do you?"

"No. Do as I tell you and I'll see that you get to Chicago. But no funny business. I'm madder'n hell."

ROSE threw back the bed covers and sat up, the feather mattress billowing about her. Her long white outing flannel nightgown had a frilled collar. She adjusted the collar and brushed back her blonde hair and stared at him, her blue eyes wide.

"Where does Jipp Grinstead sleep?" Hub asked. "And who is in this dump now?"

"Jipp sleeps in the next room. Down the hall on that side." She motioned toward the front of the house. "Pearl and Mike are across the hall from him. Slim is upstairs."

"Is that all? Sure?"

She nodded. "I'm sure."

"Where's a shotgun or rifle?"

"Both his guns are by the safe in the barroom. But he keeps a revolver under his pillow. What're you going to do to Slim now?"

"I'm going to get my watch he stole. Where does he keep his keys?"

"In his pockets. He's a mean man, Hub."

"So'm I—when I'm mad. Get your clothes on. Pack your luggage and drop it out the window into my cutter. I'm going to get a gun. Where're the shotgun shells?"

"On the back bar."

She pulled a portmanteau and a carpetbag from under the bed as Hub stepped to the door, boots in his hand.

"There may be shooting," he said. "Don't leave your room before I come back."

"I won't. I'll hurry. Are you going to kill Jipp?"

Hub did not answer. In the hall he heard Jipp Grinsted's snores before he reached the first door on his right; and he found the barroom full of stale odors and the cold shadows of dawn. He walked across the barroom to the castiron safe. In the corner he found a ten-gauge double-barreled shotgun and a single shot rifle. He broke the shotgun and slipped in two brass shells from a box on the back bar; then closed the gun, put on his boots and walked to Grinsted's bedroom.

The shotgun ready, his thumb on the right hammer and his forefinger on the front trigger, he kicked the open door and went in. Grinsted slept with his mouth open, snoring. Hub ran his right hand under the pillow and found a six-shooter. He cocked the hammer of the six-shooter, holding the shotgun in the crook of his left arm, pointed the six-shooter at the window and pulled the trigger.

Whoom! In close air of this small room the report sounded like that of a light field piece.

Grinsted jumped as though water had been doused on him; and pawed around his pillow.

"I've got your gun," Hub said and threw the six-shooter crashing through the window pane. "Get up and get me my watch and money."

"I haven't got your watch and money." Grinsted sat up, coughing as he breathed powders, smoke. "You got drunk. Remember? We put you in your cutter. Maybe you were robbed on the road."

HUB cocked the right hammer of the shotgun and laid the barrels point-blank at Grinsted's flushed face. "Get up! Quick! Put your pants on."

Grinsted brushed black hair away from before his red-rimmed eyes and got slowly to the floor. His heavy body showed paunchy, but muscular, too, in heavy gray wool drawers and undershirt. He took a pair of black trousers from a wall hook and stepped into them, grunting as he pulled the suspenders over his heavy shoulders and chest.

"Stand back out there in the hall," Hub called out. "Grinsted is coming out first with a shotgun at his back. If I see anybody with a gun I'll shoot first and talk later. Go on, you!" He poked Grinsted with the gun muzzle.

Grinsted held back at the door, but Hub rammed the shotgun into his back and ordered him: "If there's anybody out there, tell them to drop their guns so I hear them."

"Drop your gun, Mike," Grinsted said.

"Ain't got one," a voice in the hall said. "Rose, she took my gun. I thought that shot was outside."

Hub swung his foot in a hard kick at Grinsted's stern. "Get out."

Grinsted jumped and grunted an oath, but stepped out.

Hub saw a gray-haired, round-shouldered man and the brunette percentage girl, both partly dressed, in the hall at his left; and ordered them into a room near the barroom.

"I want to see this," the girl said as she hung back in the doorway. "I thought they took on too much when they tackled you tonight."

Hub booted Grinsted again. "Lock them in there!"

"I ain't got my keys."

"They're in your pocket. Get 'em out. Quick!"

Grinsted pulled a bunch of keys from his trousers pocket and locked the door.

"Go unlock your safe," Hub ordered as he moved up behind him and urged him into the barroom. "Get my wallet, my gun, and my watch."

"Lieutenant Miller," Grinsted said in a wheedling tone. "Dope Hennessey carries the key to that safe, and he's—"

Hub put the shotgun to his shoulder. "You're a liar. But it cuts no odds. Move on to the bar. If this is buckshot it'll glance." He got the bead on the shotgun's rib at the muzzle lined with the safe's padlock and fired.

The report boomed through the house like gunfire around a calm lake in early morning, and the padlock flew open as two ounces of buckshot crashed into it and shattered it.

Hub stepped out of a cloud of powder smoke. "Open it now and put my property on the bar." As Grinsted swung the safe door half open: "Hurry up!"

"Wait until I find it, will you?"

"No! And put $300 on the bar for Rose. She's leaving."

"I won't do that."

Now Hub cocked the left hammer of the shotgun and raised the gun.

"All right," Grinsted said and put Hub's watch and wallet on the bar. "There."

"Give me your keys."

Grinsted threw his bunch of keys on the bar.

"My gun and Rose's money," Hub said.

"GUN'S in the drawer." Grinsted pointed to a drawer in the back bar; then tossed a package of Treasury notes on the bar. "What now?" he growled, his lip curling against the scar on the side of his face.

"Now, Mister," Hub said slowly, "I'm going to give you a few knockout drops." He placed the shotgun on the bar. "Get your hands up!"

Surprised at this turn, Grinsted raised his hands and stepped away from the bar as Hub came at him. Hub planted a hard right in Grinsted's belly, and Grinsted dropped his arms to his middle at the unexpected blow. Hub hit him on the chin, his gloved hand crashing with force enough to have knocked out a weaker man.

But Grinsted only shook his head. And now he came in, head down and fighting mad. He straightened and tried to swing around Hub's guard at Hub's head. "Damn you," he said. "Get down where I can hit you." He swung his long arms in wide swings and landed blows on Hub's chest and belly that made Hub cautious with pain.

Now Hub circled Grinsted, looking for a chance to get in a knockout blow and saw Grinsted laughing soundlessly.

"I can fight, too, Miller," Grinsted said. "I'll kill you."

Hub knew he could crowd in, take a few blows, and step on Grinsted's bare feet. That would give him a chance for a swift uppercut to Grinsted's jaw, but it seemed unfair. He tried a quick left. It landed on Grinsted's ear and made him shift his guard and swear. Hub got in a strong uppercut then. It would have broken Grinsted's jaw, but Grinsted had jumped his guard up and his hairy wrist caught Hub's fist.

Grinsted drew his right arm back, and Hub smashed his left into Grinsted's face and saw Grinsted stand confused with pain. And now Hub stepped closer and let Grinsted have rights and lefts to his unprotected face that brought blood from his nose and cuts about his eyes.

Grinsted's dulled head seemed to clear a bit. He drew his forearm across his face and this smeared his face and undershirt sleeve with blood. He backed toward the card tables at the south end of the barroom, arms before his face, as Hub crowded him —stepping around him, getting in long swings to Grinsted's paunchy waist and his muscular chest.

Suddenly Grinsted turned and ran to a chair. He raised the chair over his head and threw it viciously at Hub, who had anticipated the throw. As the chair came hurtling at him Hub stepped lightly aside and caught it by a rung. Now Grinsted came rushing in, head down and long arms swinging. Hub swung the chair up and brought it down on Grinsted's head and right shoulder. The chair legs and rungs shattered and Grinsted went down before Hub on his hands and knees.

"Look out! Don't let him pull you down. He'll thumb your eyes out."

HUB glanced quickly at the hall entrance and saw Rose. She was dressed in a gray wool dress and wore a long black coat with a hood which was down. She had a six-shooter in her hand and tried to adjust a green shawl about her head and shoulders and hold the gun, too.

"If he gets you down, I'll shoot him," she called and advanced into the barroom. "I'd just soon kill the devil as not—in fact, I'd prefer it."

Hub reached down and got a handful of the back of Grinstead's undershirt. Twisting the shirt he ordered: "Stand up!

I'm not through with you yet."

Grinstead folded back to the floor and groaned. "I've got enough," he grunted and rolled on his side.

"He's harmless," Hub said to Rose. "Come on."

He walked to the bar, took the shotgun and cocked the left hammer as he raised the muzzles and pointed them at the wall over the safe. He pulled the back trigger and the gun roared a hole in the wall. Hub took the shotgun by the muzzles in both hands and swung the stock along the back bar in a wide sweep. A display of bottles and glasses clattered to the floor. Then he threw the gun crashing into the mirror.

Now he looked at his wallet and found his money and Swanson's letter of credit in it; and he put the wallet and his watch in their pockets. He found his gun and cartridge belt in a back bar drawer and put the belt on after inspecting the gun's loads carefully.

As he came around the bar near Rose she asked, "Where did you learn to fight like that?"

"In the army."

"He never even hit you. Even your hat is on straight."

Hub laughed. "He hit me plenty, but where it doesn't show. Here's money for you. You'll need it when you get to Chicago. He owes you, doesn't he?"

She nodded and took the currency. Then he saw her expression change. "Look out!" she screamed. "He'll get behind the bar. There's a gun under it. He'll kill you!"

Hub swung around and saw Grinsted headed toward the far end of the bar.

As Grinsted reached the gate of the bar and lifted the gate to go behind the bar Hub had travelled half the length of the long oak. He heard Rose scream: "Hurry! Hurry! The gun's about the middle!" He put both hands on the rail and vaulted over; and Grinsted smashed into him, nearly bowling him to the floor.

Grinsted reached under the bar and brought out a six-shooter. Hub caught his forearm with both hands and bent with all the strength he could put into it. He felt the arm weaken; jerked the gun from Grinsted's hand and batted Grinsted on the head with it.

HE SAW Grinsted sway away from him and turn half around; and now Hub caught Grinsted's undershirt and twisted it, pushing Grinsted against the back bar and holding him there. Hub grabbed a quart whiskey bottle, half full of whiskey, from the back bar and brought the bottle down on Grinsted's head with wicked, sickening force.

With a sigh Grinsted sank down to a sitting position; and Rose, moving up at the front of the bar, gun in her hand whispered: "Is he dead?"

"I don't know if he is or not," Hub answered, "and I don't know as I care much. Come on! We're leaving."

He met her at the back door; and he unbolted the heavy door and unhooked the storm door and let her out. They turned left toward the cutter at the corner of the house.

"Hey, big fellow, get me out of here. Take me too. Mother of God, what a fight. Did you kill him? I'm afraid of the brute, if you didn't kill him."

Hub looked up and saw Pearl leaning out of a first story window. "Oh, I forgot you." He laughed; and tossed Grinsted's keys to her.

As she caught them: "Take me with you."

"One is enough," he said. "Grinsted won't hurt you for quite awhile."

And now he was tired and his body hurt from Grinsted's blows. He had messed up the Blazing Stump and nearly killed its owner, but found small consolation in the thought. What had he accomplished? *I should have been looking after Swanson's business.* That thought stayed with him while he helped Rose get settled in Swanson's cutter and he put on his coats and unhobbled the tired and nervous mare.

The sun had risen above a bank of low gray clouds which held threat of cold and storm to the northeast as they neared Sioux City. Icicles on south eaves of the depot glistened in rays which came in over roofs of shacks and between houses as Hub tied the mare at the depot rail, but the air still held the cold winter.

The station agent was tending the waiting room fire when they entered. In bored manner he explained that a way freight with an accommodation coach would pull out at ten for Missouri Valley and "she" could ride it and catch the train or a stage there to Council Bluffs.

"Well, Rose," Hub said as he walked with her to the lunchroom doorway, "I guess you are all right now."

She held out her hand and smiled thinly. "Thank you, Hub. I wish you were going with me. But I guess I'm not your kind."

"It's not that. I've got a job to do."

"I wish I could help you."

He came alert then. "You can. Tell me who those men were who were in the card room last night."

"Honest, I don't know. I think one was Bart Sweeney."

"Do you know who rode in just before I got there?"

SHE shook her head; and he knew she told the truth. "I was taking a nap. One might have been Sweeney."

"Was Grinsted out in the afternoon? Late?"

"Yes. He left with some men when I went in my room. But I don't know who the men were. Why?"

"Nothing." He lifted his hat and opened the lunchroom door for her. "Goodbye. I wish you luck."

"And you, too," she said; and he saw hint of tears in her eyes. "In whatever you do."

He felt blue and depressed as he got in the cutter. *There is nothing I can do.* Rose thought Bart Sweeney had been in the card room. But even if Sweeney was there, it proved nothing. To find the bandits who had Swanson's payroll and who had shot Jack Springer, even to get a clue as to their identity, was going to prove impossible. He might as well give up.

He helped the hotel stableman care for Swanson's mare; then went to his room, took off his clothes except his underwear and laid down on the bed. Although he had not eaten since yesterday afternoon he was more tired than hungry. He wanted to sleep and pulled a blanket over himself. Turning on his side he settled for a nap, but found his brain too active. Something was in this thing; if he could find it, it might put him on the trail of the bandits he was seeking.

He reviewed his experiences of yesterday and last night, one by one; and his mind sifted each point. Wayne Musgoes had acted strangely. It was unexplainable that he was sick at home when Hub and Jack Springer called at the bank in the afternoon and had been gone from home, apparently, in the evening. Grinsted had not wanted Hub to see the men in the back cardroom. Had doped him in order to get him out of the Blazing Stump. Why? Hub wondered. *Not so he could rob me.*

And now his mind ran over the fight. Grinsted had put up a fair scrap. Had said he could fight—

Hub sat up. *He called me Miller! He knew my name!*

Jipp Grinsted had no way of knowing his name, unless someone had told Grinsted what his name was. Who? Not Rose. She did not know his last name. Sweeney? Possibly. But whoever it was —and this he saw as the main point—had done so because it was important to the teller and Jipp Grinsted. That meant both the teller and Jipp Grinsted were interested in him. Why? He could find no answer except the holdup.

This much he had to work on now. He was pleased that he had something. He would stay in town and see what he could run on to, as Swanson had suggested. The camp team would be in tonight; and he must see Daisy and send a note to Swanson. With luck he might be able to justify the trust her father had placed in him. He stretched out on the bed, pulled the blanket over his length; and this time he went to sleep.

CHAPTER XVIII

LOUD talk of chambermaids in the hall woke Hub in the afternoon. Snapping open his watch he saw it was slightly after two o'clock; and now he was hungry and thirsty.

He pulled on his trousers, stamped into his boots, and went along the hall to the bathroom, but found the cistern water too cold for a bath. Back at the head of the stairs he called the clerk and ordered hot water carried up. After his bath he dressed hurriedly and went to the barbershop for a shave; then returned to his room and put on his hat and buffalo coat.

He ate a hearty meal in a German restaurant near the corner of Jones and Third Streets. As he left the restaurant he passed a hardware store and went in to buy ammunition for Swanson's Winchester, but found the store had no 44-40 Winchester cartridges. On his way to Fourth Street he heard the *thump, thump* of a cobbler's hammer in Max's shop at the corner and was reminded of the heel he had found at the scene of the holdup.

"How's business?" he asked Max as he went in the shop.

Max sat on his low cobbler's bench, a lasted boot between his knees, his mouth full of wooden pegs. He looked up at Hub, a worried, harassed expression on his red German face, and grumbled through pegs: "Nicht so goot. Hard times now. People want only repairs. No new work. What you want? Dem boots I sell you—all right? Ya?" He jabbed a peg into an awl hole in the boot's sole and slammed the peg home with his broad hammer.

Hub took the heel from his overcoat pocket. "Did you make this heel?"

"How should I know?"

"It was shot off a man's boot. See the hole a buckshot made?"

"Eh?" Max stood up, straightened his leather apron, and examined the heel. With quick steps he went to a bench which was strewn with boots and shoes waiting to be repaired. "Sure, I made it. Boot, too. For Banker Musgoes last spring."

"What!"

Max held out a black boot. "See? Yest fits. From where you get this heel? Musgoes, er go hunting and somebody shoot him for a deer." He handed boot and heel to Hub.

Hub looked closely at the boot. A grove in the heel and one in the heelplate of the boot fitted exactly and made a hole at the point where the heel had joined it. Plainly a buckshot had struck at the right place to rip off the heel. And this heel belonged to this boot for nails in the boot fitted nail holes in the heel exactly.

Max's shrewd eyes searched Hub's face. "From where you get that heel?"

"I found it. Out in the woods."

"Ach! Sure. Musgoes, er get shot. Let me take 'em. I put the heel back on."

"Uh-uh," Hub said and dropped a ten dollar gold piece on the bench. "Let me keep the boot. You can make Musgoes another."

He folded the boot top, put boot and heel in his overcoat pocket, and started for the door.

"Nein! Nein! Ach! Vait! Banker Musgoes, er hat mortgage on my place. Goot in himmel!"

"Never mind," Hub said and laughed. "I'll bring it back before long." He went out; and Max, angry, stood in the doorway of his shop and shouted after him.

Hub went to his room in the Ridings and sat down by the window. The pattern of his puzzle had begun to take shape. Wayne Musgoes could not possibly be guilty of participating in murder and highway robbery. Yet Max had said the boot belonged to Musgoes. And the heel belonged to the boot. Unbelievable as it seemed, Musgoes—respected banker and prominent citizen—had been with the holdup gang. *It was his horse jumped at my first shot.*

He thought all around it; and now he saw much behind it. The pattern became plainer. Musgoes' actions yesterday. His delay in cashing the check. His absence from his residence last evening. The delay over the pork. *Musgoes was one of them.*

Who were the others? Again Hub remembered Jipp Grinsted had known his name. Thinking of that, he opened his wallet, unfolded Swanson's letter of credit and read it.

It ran:

To whom this concerns:

The bearer, Hubert Miller, is in my employ. For value received, I hereby guarantee payment of his debts undertaken in the necessities of my business for a month from date. Please to let him have what he needs—cash, found, transportation, and help—and draw on me to cover, thirty days sight, with exchange, bill attached, through any bank or banker in Council Bluffs, to charge my account Iowa Lumber Company.

M. Swanson

HUB'S spirits fell as he realized this letter which Marcus Swanson had intrusted to him could have been Jipp Grinsted's source of information as to his name.

He thought back over words Grinsted had used when he called him by name: *"I can fight, too, Miller. I'll kill you."* Again when Grinsted had said Dope Hennessey carried the key to the safe—

Hub jumped to his feet. *When he called me Miller that time he said Lieutenant Miller!*

Only Marcus Swanson and Daisy knew he had been a second lieutenant in the war. Had Daisy introduced him to Musgoes as Lieutenant Miller? No, he was positive she had said, "Mr. Miller" in the bank. The visit to Cortland Statler's law office? Ah! there the introduction had been "Lieutenant Miller." Even the suave lawyer had called him *Lieutenant,* with emphasis on the word. But Statler had called him Mr.

Miller in the sheriff's office.

On Thursday afternoon, Hub knew, when he and Daisy Swanson called at Cortland Statler's office no one in all Iowa knew he had been a lieutenant except Daisy, her father, Suwannee, and Cortland Statler. Between Thursday afternoon and this morning Jipp Grinsted had heard him referred to as Lieutenant Miller. By whom?

The answer must be Statler; and Hub found the answer interesting.

But he knew it proved nothing of value, though it cast suspicion on Statler. All he was sure of was the fact that Musgoes had been in the gang which shot Jack Springer.

Had Musgoes been in the two holdups last fall? The money involved in those came from Council Bluffs. The second messenger had been shot between Council Bluffs and Sioux City.

Jack Springer had said both messengers reported four bandits in the fall holdups. These bandits knew the money was coming. The second time they even knew it was coming from Council Bluffs. From whom did they get their information?

Now he considered the fact that the holdup of yesterday had been planned and staged in a few hours. Musgoes had learned of the $15,500 check in the morning. Before six o'clock four masked men and Musgoes had been waiting for Swanson's cutter at a lonely spot nearly fifteen miles north of town. Four of these men must have been handy to Musgoes. The fact meant, too, that Musgoes surely knew them as bandit material. So, Hub reasoned, thinking closely, at least one man of Musgoes gang had been in one or both of the fall holdups. Who?

Cortland Statler! His mind whispered more: *Daisy's prospective husband. It was not Bart Sweeney. He was at camp.*

Thoughtfully, convinced he was making headway, he put on his buffalo coat and got his hat at the right angle, and went to the street.

He had questions to ask Daisy Swanson. She would not like the questions. Would hate him for them.

But it had to be. For now he had a plan. And whether or not the plan was worth trying depended on Daisy's answers to his questions.

Daisy came to the door, radiant and smiling, when Hub cranked the doorbell. She wore a gray velvet dress with a full skirt and tight bodice which Hub thought gave her a mature look.

He gave her news of the holdup in the hall. As they moved into the sitting room he told her of Jack Springer's death and saw emotion show on her face. They talked of it until Hub said, "I must get word to your father.

"Yes." She moved to a spinet desk near the window. "What shall I say?"

Hub moved over and stood beside her. "Tell him, please, that we were held up and robbed and the messenger was shot. That I've clues and know who was one of the bandits."

She looked up quickly. "Who?"

HE HESITATED; and she turned in her chair.

"You may tell your father one of the men was Wayne Musgoes."

"Why!" Daisy mouth opened and she stared at Hub. "Wayne Musgoes! It couldn't have been. You must be mistaken."

"I think not." He turned away and took a few steps. "Please tell your father just those things and see that the teamster gets the note tonight." He came back to her side. "And now, Miss Daisy, I've a question."

"Yes, Hub."

"I wish you would think back to last fall at the times of those holdups. Can you remember if you talked to anyone about the messengers coming through with payrolls?"

Daisy's face colored; and Hub thought the color made her more pretty. "No," she said positively. "I mentioned it to no one. I'm certain I didn't." She saw his disappointment. "Why?"

"It's quite important. How did you know the company was sending the payrolls out to camp?"

"The first time I didn't, but the messenger called here the night before he was robbed to ask the way to camp. That's the way I knew about that one."

Quickly he asked, "Was anyone here when he called? Tell me about it. You know I want to help.

She bit her lip. "Yes, someone was here, calling. I went to the door and talked to the messenger. While he waited in the hall I came to my desk here and drew a little map for him."

"Who was here, Daisy?"

"I'm wondering if you don't know al-

ready, Hub." She stood up now and put her hand on his arm. "You are going to run them down?"

"Yes." He watched her closely. "Do you care?"

She smiled and shook her head slowly.

"Not even if one should be a prospect for a husband, Daisy?"

She colored prettily. "If you find the men who robbed my father and killed that nice Mr. Springer—as far as I'm concerned, you may arrest them all. Or shoot them, if you have to."

"The second payroll?"

She sat down at the desk and found a letter in an end pigeonhole and handed it to Hub. On Iowa Lumber Company Stationery it ran:

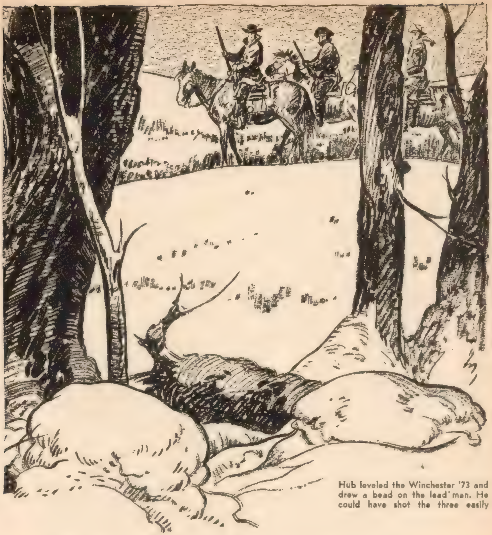
8th. November 1873

Dear Miss Swanson:

Please advise the sheriff our payroll messenger to your father's camp will be coming through the afternoon of Friday, the tenth instant. Also kindly send a sealed note to your father by camp teamster on receipt of this letter.

"Did you tell Murt Melvig?" Hub asked.

"No, I didn't. He wasn't in his office.



Hub leveled the Winchester '73 and drew a bead on the lead man. He could have shot the three easily

I left a note for him. That isn't it, Hub. The same caller was here the night before the second holdup; and this letter was on my desk. I left the room and went upstairs for my things to go riding."

She bit her lip; then stood up. Now she turned and picked a dead leaf from a plant on the window sill.

"Do you love him?" Hub asked.

SHE swung around. "Would any woman say you could shoot a man she loved?"

"It may not be necessary."

She put her hand on his arm. "What are you going to do?"

"I've a plan."

"But you may be shot."

He grinned down at her. Then as he saw her expression change his changed with hers. She was lovely. He felt the warm friendliness of her good womanhood. Knew she was drawn to him; and he to her. He was tempted to hold out his arms, draw her into them, and kiss her upturned face. But he checked himself, angry because of the weakness he was showing.

"Not if I see them first," he said.

"Your plan, Hub?"

"I'll be up again at nine or shortly before to give you more word for your father. Just now I think I had better see a certain man."

"Who?"

"The one upon whom the success of my plan depends."

"Is it the sheriff?"

"No," he answered. "Not Murt Melvig."

She dropped her hand from his arm; and he moved toward the hall. "Who, Hub? Cortland Statler?"

He laughed. "Now, Daisy—" He put his hand under her arm and saw her look up and give him a quick smile. "This is a very secret plan."

"I was hoping—"

They reached the hall. Hub put on his overcoat; and she opened the door.

"You were hoping what, Daisy?" he asked.

She pursed her lips and smiled roguishly; her large eyes shone with mischief; and now he thought she seemed young and immature. "That you would trust me and tell me all about your plan."

He shook his head; and she saw his serious expression. "I can't—with this one."

"Oh."

"The success of it depends on my being certain no one knows of it except myself—no one else."

She became noticeably formal—a habit he thought she had when displeased. He lifted his hat as he reached the steps; and she shut the door.

He went directly to the hotel stable and ordered the stableman to hitch the mare to Swanson's cutter. He saw to it that Swanson's Winchester, the two coils of rope from the holdup, and a hand axe were in the cutter. He had the hotel cook prepare a lunch of sandwiches and a bottle of cold coffee. In his room he took off his boots and put on his heavy socks and shoepacs. And got his army canteen and army cup from his packsack.

AFTER telling the clerk he would be gone for a few days he went a block west to a saddlery and bought a rifle boot and returned to the hotel, got his lunch, and a supply of matches, and filled his canteen.

As he drove to Ebernau's livery he checked all details in his mind and could think of nothing he had omitted except ammunition for Swanson's rifle. But it was part of his plan to buy that later. He might be gone for days, but he knew how to be comfortable in the woods; and what he was taking would be enough for the time.

At Ebernau's he told the stall man to put Swanson's mare in a boarding stall; then went to the office. Old Charley Ebernau had a nervous affliction which made his head shake as he looked up from his desk when Hub entered the office.

"Mr. Ebernau?" Hub said.

Ebernau stood up. "Yes, sir."

"My name's Miller. I'm working for Marcus Swanson." Hub handed the old man Swanson's letter of credit; and waited until he had read it. "Is my credit good here."

Ebernau folded the letter and handed it to Hub. "Yes, sir, it be. Good for anything you want."

Hub caught the kindly look in the old man's eyes and smiled at him. "All right, sir, I want a cavalry saddle with large bags, one full of oats, and your best saddle horse. I may be gone for a week. I may never come back. I'm leaving Marcus Swanson's mare and cutter—"

"Mr. Miller—" Ebernau paused as he attempted to steady his shaking head. "You go out and tell my man to fix you up with anything you want." He raised his hand to his white beard. "Tell him you want my black Bill. He's my best saddle horse. Pick out a saddle to suit you in the harness room and take anything else you need."

It was half past five when Hub left Ebernau's livery. A fine black gelding had been saddled for him. The saddle bags were packed with oats and Hub's canteen and lunch. The bearskin robe and hand axe were held by saddle straps behind the cantle of the saddle; the ropes hung coiled at the front coat straps below the horn, and Swanson's Winchester was in the new long rifle boot. This boot Hub had fastened in front of the saddle by the saber straps after removing the short carbine boot which the saddle carried below the cantle.

He walked directly to Cortland Statler's law office stairway. Darkness had come. Lights were lighted in the waiting room; and Hub saw through the open door that the lamp on the library table was lighted. No one was in the waiting room, but he heard someone in the rear of the office.

Cortland Statler entered the library from his private office and saw Hub in the waiting room doorway. "Oh, good evening, Lieutenant. My man's gone to supper. Come in, won't you?"

Hub walked into the library and stood near the green-topped table.

Statler shut the door into the waiting room and the door into his private office. "No one is here," he said, "but perhaps you would prefer the doors shut. What can I do for you?"

CHAPTER XIX

HUB sat down at the table. "I'm wondering if you've a rifle I can borrow for awhile. I've Mr. Swanson's Winchester with me, but I can't buy any 44-40 ammunition."

"Certainly," Statler said in his polished manner. "You can take my Sharps. It's fifty caliber and heavy, but it's accurate."

Hub saw Statler's eyes narrow. He saw, too, what he thought was a skeptical look and wondered if this shrewd lawyer would believe the story he intended to tell him now.

Statler hesitated as if about to ask a question; then went in his bedroom and came back carrying a single shot rifle and a box of cartridges. "Going hunting?" he inquired as he put rifle and cartridges on the table.

"No, not hunting. Well, yes, I am. For bandits."

"Bandits!" Statler exclaimed with simulated surpise. He sat down across the table from Hub. "What bandits?"

"Four I think have headed into the Territory." Hub assumed a thoughtful air. "Mr. Statler, you're Marcus Swanson's lawyer, aren't you?"

"Yes, I guess I am. I've attended to such legal matters as he's had in the last few years."

"I came in town for him. He told me to see you about being deputized—"

"Of course. Glad to do whatever I can."

"This is confidential."

"Oh, certainly! No need to worry about that."

"But I feel someone I can trust should know about it in case I don't come back—"

"Yes, of course. What is it?"

Hub had watched him closely. Statler gave him a queer feeling. He did not like him.

"Late yesterday Jack Springer, a messenger from Swanson's company at Council Bluffs, and I were on our way to Swanson's camps with $15,500 pay money and we were held up. Jack Springer was shot—"

"No!"

"Yes." Hub nodded slowly. "Shot and killed instantly. They got him and the money. Springer's wife lives in Council Bluffs. She's got a baby. I figure it was my fault Springer was shot."

"Your fault! How is that?"

"I proposed we draw lots to see who would be guard, figuring that was most dangerous. Springer got to drive. If he had been guard and I had been driving they might have shot me instead of him."

Statler's face had showed horror. Now it registered sympathy. "That's terrible, Lieutenant Miller! Terrible! Who were they? Do you know? Bandits from Dakota?"

"I figure some were. There were five."

"Probably all five?"

"I'm sure one wasn't." Now Hub told him of shooting at the bandits with Swanson's shotgun and how he had pumped lead after them with the Winchester. But he said nothing of his visit to the Blazing Stump nor of finding the boot heel where he looked.

"This one rider you say was not from the Territory. Did you see him?"

"I saw all five as I told you."

"Recognize him?"

"No."

"Then how do you know he wasn't from the Territory?"

"I know who he is."

Statler leaned forward in his chair. "Oh!"

Hub said. "That's the reason I thought I ought to tell you this. So someone else will know about it. And I want some advice—"

"Yes," Statler prompted.

"It's a strange thing. I shot his boot heel off." Hub reached in his pocket and produced the heel. "You can see a buckshot hit it where it was fastened to the boot."

"I see," Statler observed as he examined the heel closely. "But how does that tell you who—? By the way, who do you think this man was?"

"Why, now, that's strange, too, Mr. Statler. It was the banker across the street. Wayne—"

"Wayne Musgoes! Wayne Musgoes!" Statler exclaimed in a surprised tone. "That's preposterous. It couldn't be possible."

"I wouldn't say so. He put Jack and me off for hours cashing the check. I suppose his bank is shaky, like all of them. And that heel is from his boot. I found it out there where we were held up."

"How do you know it's from his boot?"

"I've got the boot."

"You've got the boot!" Statler exclaimed. "How in hell did you get the boot?"

"That's strange too." Now Hub told him of finding the boot at the shoemaker's. "Here it is." He pulled the boot from the pocket of his buffalo coat and fitted the heel to it. "See how one belongs to the other? Nails and nail holes jibe. See how the grove from the buckshot runs—half in the heel, half in the boot?"

"Well, I'm damned," Statler said. "Very convincing."

"Yes, isn't it?" Hub remarked rather dryly and saw Statler give him a sharp look. "Now, Mr. Statler, I wish you'd go with me while I swear out a warrant for Wayne Musgoes' arrest."

"Nnn-no," Statler managed and shook his head as he smiled tolerantly. "Not that. Not yet. I don't believe we had best do that. Had we, Lieutenant?"

"Why not? This proves he was there. Doesn't it?"

"NNN—I wouldn't say so. I don't think a jury would either—on that evidence. Though the heel and boot match, Max may be mistaken about the ownership of the boot. It may be Musgoes', but someone else may have been wearing it. I'm afraid if you go swearing out warrants you may get yourself into trouble."

"How so?"

"Musgoes will sue you for false arrest. He is very prominent. I can't believe he knows anything about the matter."

"I'd be willing to risk it. I think he should be confronted with that evidence. They shot a good man. I want those rewards. Marcus Swanson put a lot of confidence in me. I don't like to fail him. It means a lot to me."

"I can well appreciate that, but I think you had better wait until you have proof which is positive." Statler slowly drummed on the table now as if giving the matter deep thought. "Musgoes would be done a great injustice if you are wrong."

"What do you suggest I do? Musgoes, I suppose, will keep."

"He can't very well run away."

"That's one reason I've told you this," Hub said. "If I don't come back, you'll have the facts and you can present them to the County Attorney and—"

"Eh? Oh, I say now, you put me in an embarrassing position, Lieutenant. Mr. Musgoes is a friend of mine and a client. So is Marcus Swanson." His face brightened momentarily. "Why, I suggest you try and catch one or all of these bandits. Then if one turns State's evidence, you'll have something tangible on which to work. Even to get the rewards you'll have to have proof the man or men you accuse are guilty, you know."

"I see," Hub said resignedly. "Then I'd better work on the gang?"

"That's it. See if you can't run them down. You think they went into the Territory?"

"That's where I'd head for if I was one of them."

"Hmm-m, yes, where there's no law, of course. The Territory is pretty big." He stood up. "But I've heard there's a place about ten miles northwest of Braugier's crossing where gangs of road agents sometimes hang out."

"Where's that?" Hub asked eagerly.

Statler moved to a map on the wall back of Hub, and Hub stood up.

Statler found the Big Sioux River on the map and said: "Ten miles from town you can cross the Sioux at Braugier's Crossing. There's a woman called Lil—Black Lil, though she isn't colored—runs a place there. She's a good sort. When would you start?"

"This evening. Tonight."

"Well," Statler said thoughtfully, "you could stay at Lil's tonight. She rents rooms and serves good meals. It's a shady roadhouse. Stage stops there, and there's gambling. Then go on in the morning. They've quite a start on you. What if you don't have any luck?"

"I'LL keep on going," Hub answered and ran his finger over to the course of the Missouri on the map. "On up here until I come to Pierre or even Bismarck. That's probably where they're heading for right now."

Statler went back to the table and sat down. "Well, Lieutenant, I wish you luck. It's chancey and risky, but it's your only chance, if you're determined to try and catch them." He smiled tolerantly at Hub. "You are, I take it?"

"I am." Hub moved to the end of the table and put the boot and heel in his overcoat pocket. Then he picked up the Sharps and cartridges. "Well, I guess that's all. You will please keep this confidential. I want no one to know it except you and Marcus Swanson. I'd like to have you repeat it to him, if I'm not back in a week or so roughly."

Statler jumped to his feet. "Oh, of course. I won't tell a soul where you're going." He went to the hall door with Hub and unlocked it, then held out his hand. "Goodbye, Lieutenant."

"Goodbye," Hub said as he shook hands. *Does he know anything?* he asked himself as he went down the stairs. *I'll soon know.*

He went into Carsten's hardware store and bought a box of fifty 44-40 Winchester rifle shells and then went to the hotel. He intended to eat a late supper. After supper he had nothing to do until it was time for him to make a brief call on Daisy Swanson.

Cortland Statler returned to the library table, sat down, put his feet on the table, and let his keen mind go to work on what Hub had told him.

This quiet-spoken fellow Marcus Swanson trusted was no dolt, Statler realized. And his story checked off as true. He was a stranger in these parts. He needed a rifle for his manhunt in the Territory and could not buy ammunition for Swanson's new Winchester. He needed legal advice, too. Quite naturally, Statler recognized, he had thought of Swanson's lawyer as the one from whom he could borrow a rifle and get advice about a warrant for Wayne Musgoes' arrest. Miller had been frank to say he wanted the rewards. He was chagrined that he had failed Swanson. His temper was aroused over the shooting of Jack Springer. If he had any fear for his own safety he would disregard it.

And now Miller was bound out alone on a wild goose chase through country as lawless as any west of the Missouri. Statler's tense expression relaxed as he considered the dangers of the trip at this time of year. The cuss might run into a norther, he thought hopefully, get lost and freeze to death.

AGAIN he put his mind back over what Hub had said. He found much to worry him in it. Miller knew Wayne Musgoes was in the holdup. With good reason, too. The boot unquestionably was the banker's. And the heel which Miller had found at the scene of the holdup belonged to the boot. Miller, of course, would not find the men he sought in the Territory. Eventually he would return. If he went to the County Attorney with his damning evidence the prosecutor would draft a complaint against Musgoes for a whole chapter of statutory crimes. A warrant would issue; the sheriff would be obliged to serve it. Prominent, respected Wayne Musgoes would be arrested. A run would start on the Musgoes First National. All Hell would tear loose. It must follow that he, himself, would be exposed.

Statler reviewed this in sober contemplation and saw but one way out. This Miller must be eliminated. Quickly. In the Territory, where the law would not interfere. Before Miller returned empty handed from his wild goose chase and had Wayne Musgoes arrested. But how could he possibly eliminate him?

He thought all around it and presently found an answer. He jumped to his feet, strode to the waiting room door and rapped twice. Frank Wilkes came hurriedly in.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Statler?"

"Who's waiting out there?"

"A couple of farmers and—"

"All right. I want to slip over to the bank. If Musgoes is in, I'll be gone awhile. Can't you tend to 'em?"

THE question seemed to please Wilkes. "Yes, sir, I believe I could. Probably talk is all they want."

"All right, you talk to 'em. I'll sneak out. Tell them I'm not feeling well and am going to lie down. Get rid of 'em any way you can."

He turned abruptly and walked into his bedroom and lighted the lamp on the table at the side window. Then he put on his fur-lined overcoat and black felt hat. Moving to his bed he looked out a rear window at the alley, now indistinct in evening's dusk, and got his plan in order.

Wayne Musgoes would be frightened. He would want Miller eliminated. But Musgoes lacked the nerve of a rabbit. He would not chase Miller into the Territory and pick a shooting match with him in a wayside inn or lonely stage post. But, if frightened enough, Musgoes would—Ah! He had it now.

The simplicity of the solution astonished him. The fact he had not thought of it before nettled his conceit. He saw money and safety in it for himself. For a moment he tasted satisfaction. Then, smiling, he stepped briskly to the hall door, unlocked it, and went quietly to the stairway and the street.

He had not been in Musgoes bank since night before last and wanted no one to see him go there now. Walking rapidly, he crossed the street, turned north and went around the block end to the alley.

As he ducked around a longer building north of the bank he saw a light through drawn curtains of Musgoes' rear office. Hurrying along the path to the back door he knocked and waited.

"Who is it?"

"Cort, Wayne. Let me in. Quick!"

The door opened and Statler pushed past Musgoes; then waited while Musgoes locked the door. They went down a short hall to the counting room; behind the counter and past the black door of the iron vault to Musgoes' private office.

The large room was furnished with a leather couch against the back wall, a long oak table in the center, a few oak chairs about the table, and a wide bookcase near the door. A worn red rug covered the floor. Books of account, opened, were on the table.

Statler halted in the doorway. "Trying to make 'em balance, Wayne?" he inquired innocently.

Musgoes turned up a hanging lamp over the table and sat down in a swivel chair, his back to the drawn shades at the room's barred windows. "What do you want, Cort?" he asked impatiently and peered under taut brows across the table at Statler. "I've my hands full of work."

"I bring bad news," Statler announced in an expressionless tone. "Very bad news indeed."

Musgoes' frown deepened. He reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a half stick of licorice, then he rummaged in his trousers pocket for his knife.

STATLER advanced to the table between them, setting his face in an expression to suit his role.

"For gawd's sake what is it?" Musgoes asked as Statler came into the light's range. "You look scared to death."

"Brother Miller, Swanson's private detective, has your heelless boot." Statler wriggled his mustache and blinked his eyes as he waited for the pronouncement to take effect.

"Brother Miller, Swanson's—Where did he get my boot?"

"From Max, the shoemaker."

"From Max!"

"It appears you thriftily, but foolishly, took it there for repairs, instead of burning it." Statler stopped a smile of amusement quickly. "What's more, Max told Miller the boot is yours. He made it. He advised Miller you must have been hunting or something and got shot, and that's why the heelplate of the boot has a groove such as a buckshot would leave in it. The German mind is slow, Wayne, but like justice it works inexorably to a correct conclusion."

Lack of understanding dulled the look of plain fright on Musgoes' pallid and sagging face.

"There's a groove in the bottom of the boot where a buckshot knocked off the heel. I saw it."

"Oh, God!" Musgoes finished the exclamation in a whistle of expelled breath. "Old Stonedef! My German housekeeper—the damned old fool. She saw it behind the stove. I told her to leave it alone. But she can't hear any better 'n a post and what English she hears she can't understand. I suppose she took it to Max for an excuse to see him. She and he are great friends. Now what?"

"Miller was in my office for professional advice about warrants."

"About warrants?" Musgoes repeated slowly.

"Warrants for your arrest."

"Huh? My arrest! My arrest, Cort? I, I don't see—I thought only you knew—I was masked all the time. The others didn't even know—"

Miller says you took a lot of time dillydallying over the lumber company's check. It made him suspicious. Now he has acquired State's exhibit A, to-wit: the boot—the boot we both know."

Musgoes had quit rummaging for his

knife. He let his hand stay in his pocket and he just stared at Statler as though for the first time the full enormity of his crimes had dawned upon him. Wants to arrest me," he whispered as if to himself and no one else.

"Murder, manslaughter, highway robbery." Statler paused, malice and greed showing in his green eyes. "Anything he can arrest you for."

"Murder! Manslaughter!" Musgoes repeated.

"That messenger, Jack Springer, got shot, I believe you realize. Dead!"

MUSGOES hastily found his knife. He opened a blade and looked at it as if in a trance. Then, seemingly exhausted, he leaned back in his chair and stared past Statler at the shadowed wall of his office. A portrait of his father in black broadcloth appeared to fascinate him. He gazed at it a long moment, his knife in one hand, stick of black licorice in the other. The old man with the short beard whose ruddy face Musgoes could barely see in shaded lamplight would turn over in his grave were his spirit listening here tonight.

Statler studied him, his nimble brain working, his own worries and greed crowding out any compassion. "We're all guilty, Wayne."

"But I didn't shoot him. Never had—"

"Oh, hell!" Statler's soft voice became jibing. "Did you ever hear of accessory to the fact and intent to commit one major crime supplies intent to commit another." He saw Musgoes jump as though someone had poked him in the stomach. "Are you going daft, Wayne?"

The question had directly the opposite effect from what Statler had expected. It appeared to calm Musgoes. Color came to his face and he sat straighter. "No, I'm not going daft." He set about cutting a piece of licorice from the stick. "But I'm damned near worried to death."

Statler found enjoyment in this and it showed in relaxed lines about his mouth. "Out of the frying pan into the fire, Eh, Wayne?"

"All right, all right. What've you got in mind?"

"Get rid of Miller."

Musgoes had a piece of licorice in his mouth now; and he rolled it around meditatively as he wiped the knife on his boot upper. "How? You got any ideas?"

"Yes, but I'll hear yours first."

"Bribe him."

"Bribe him!" Statler snorted. "With $5,000 of reward money to cover?"

"What then?"

"Kill him!"

"Jesus!" Musgoes' head jerked up.

Statler sat down across the table from him, his eyes holding Musgoes'. The banker's shifted away first. He put the knife and licorice stick in his coat pocket. Becoming aware this was not following habit he fumbled around and got the knife transferred to his trousers pocket.

Statler saw Musgoes ponder this. Trying to make up his mind as he would were he considering a loan to an already overextended customer. Mulling it over, drawing away from it, coming back to it, weighing chance against chance. Afraid of it, but knowing he would have to do it in spite of his fear.

Presently Musgoes said, "You say I've one killing now?"

"I said we all have. You can stay in the pen for one as long as for two, Wayne."

Musgoes tried to chew on the licorice and spat darkly at a brass cuspidor. "Where is he?"

"He has gone out looking for the highwaymen. He's a notion they're headed into the Territory, and he's out to get them. He says he has you on ice until he gets back."

"What are you planning on doing? Ride out in the Territory and shoot him?"

"Now, Wayne—Me go and do a thing like that?"

"There's no law in the Territory, is there?"

"Not much. But there's plenty here. If I did it people would look here for a motive."

Musgoes sighed heavily. "But I won't do it. I'm no—"

"I didn't expect you would."

"Who then?"

"Jipp."

"Have you seen Jipp Grinsted about this?"

"Certainly," Statler promptly lied.

"I don't like it." Musgoes swung around in his chair. He saw his shadow on a window shade and through the shade the window bars. Involuntarily he shuddered. "I, I can't have anything to do with it."

"I don't like it, either. And you won't like this."

Musgoes snapped his chair around and faced Statler. "What?"

"It'll cost money."

"Why? Grinsted's in this as much as you and me. Hell! He may not have any reputation to lose, but he doesn't want to go to jail any more 'n I do. I'd be a ruined man if this even starts."

STATLER smiled tolerantly. "Jipp won't take chances. He'll hire it done."

"How much? Much?"

"Plenty."

"How much?"

Statler stood up now. He had this where he wanted it. Mentally he had raised his figure from $500 to $1,000. Now he jumped it to $1,500. He saw Musgoes' hand shake. "Two thousand dollars."

"What! Two thousand dollars? I haven't got it."

"Your bank has."

"Good God, man, I told you—" Musgoes glared at Statler. "Tell Grinsted I said—"

"Do you wish me to mention your name in this?" Statler stood up and started buttoning his coat. "The boot is yours, Wayne."

"There were five in the job. You and—you and—"

Statler stopped him with a laugh. "Frank Wilkes will testify he and I were in my library drawing a bill in chancery at any hour Miller can place the time of the holdup. I've even clients who were in my waiting room while we could have been drawing the bill."

Now he smiled down confidently at Musgoes, whose mouth slowly opened as he looked at him. "I saw those clients later, too."

"How did you get back in your office without 'em hearing you?"

"Oh,h,h—I've a way for that. There's a convenient back stairway to the attic of Naper's drugstore next door. I keep a short plank on the roof. It will reach across to my bedroom window ledge. I didn't ride my own horse—perhaps you noticed."

"Whose did you ride?"

"One I—ah, borrowed from the back rail of the hotel. I knew its owner was busy at a meeting."

"I should think you'd been afraid somebody'd see you when you got back and tied him?"

"Humpf!" Statler snorted. "I'm not so all-fired simple as to do that."

"What did you do?"

"Left him loose down the alley. The obliging beast walked back and stood at the rail untied." Statler saw Musgoes study him now. Time to drive this thing home and get it over with. "You rode your own horse, Wayne. That was incriminating, too. People know what time you left and got back. Men at Ebernau's livery will swear both my nags were in their stalls all day and night."

He saw Musgoes' face register despair, then saw his beaten look go. He was thinking, and Statler knew his thoughts before Musgoes voiced them in a slowly spoken question.

"Why are you so anxious to have this Miller killed, if you've nothing to worry about?"

STATLER had answers ready and gave one quickly: "My friends might doublecross me to save their own necks."

"You mean?"

"When they arrest you, Wayne—" He paused and watched the banker shrink—"and they will if this Miller stays alive—you might squeal."

"Un-uh. 'Tain't the real reason. I want the real one."

"I intend to marry Daisy Swanson."

Musgoes let this news sift through his tired and worried brain and saw possibilities in it. If Cortland Statler married Marcus Swanson's only child there might be safety for himself as well as Statler in Swanson's financial worth. He rolled the licorice around with his tongue as he considered. Looking at Statler now he saw the lawyer's good looks. He had personality and what women like. But no such stature and appeal as the big fellow who had walked into his bank with the lumber company's messenger yesterday morning when it happened.

"And Miller is in the way?" Musgoes inquired.

"I'm afraid he might be. This holdup and Springer's murder certainly is, if they put you on the grill. Be that as it may, Wayne, I can't let you forget there'll be $8,000 left after my notes are paid. Half, you will remember, is mine."

He watched this soak in; and saw the haggard, hunted look return to Musgoes' face. The chump was so worried he couldn't even play a close game. One more good bet and he would fan out.

"I dunno," Musgoes said, "even if he has the boot—"

"I meant to tell you, Wayne— He has the heel also. Found it out there in the snow. It fits perfectly. Half a buckshot hole in the heel, half in—"

Musgoes came out of his chair as if he had been blown from it by dynamite. He gave Statler a hard glance from beneath drawn eyebrows as he swung around the table and halted near him. "I'm wondering, Cortland Statler, if I can trust you."

Statler laughed. "Don't wonder such things. Any man's trustworthy until he's in a corner. I'm not in a corner. I don't intend to get pushed into one either. But you are, my friend. Right-square-in-a-corner. I said $2,000. It better be gold and United States government paper. Jipp's boys are touchy about banknotes these days."

"Is this coming back to me, too?" Musgoes asked.

"Why, no. How can it?"

"What are you going to tell Grinsted?"

"Nothing except Miller is dangerous and we've got to get him out of the way."

Musgoes had started for the door. He stopped now. "You and Jipp Grinsted have got to get him out of the way, you mean. I'm not in this."

"That's what I mean."

Statler sat down. He reached under the lapel of his overcoat and took a thin cigar from an inside pocket and calmly lighted it. He heard the vault door open, then the safe door. Quickly he counted his own gain. Jip Grinsted would get anybody killed for $500. He would be glad to have Miller shot for less than that. It meant at least $1,500 clear profit for himself, Statler was certain.

THEN Miller would be out of the way. No need to worry about holdups. In a few days Daisy Swanson would come around and they would be married—

"There you are," Musgoes said as he entered and tossed coin rolls and a package of bills in Statler's lap. He advanced to the table. "$2,000. Count it and see if it's all right."

Statler stood up and put the money in his overcoat pocket. "I'll accept your count" He walked to the office door. "Come let me out, will you?"

"Where're you going now?"

"Out to Jipp's."

Musgoes went with him to the back door of the bank, a ring of keys in his hand. He moved the bolt and bent to put a key in the lock, then straightened, a look of anguish showing on his face in dim light. "Remember now, Cort, I don't want to know anything about this."

"It'll be Jipp's affair."

Musgoes unlocked the door then, but he hesitated, hand gripping the knob. "Jipp doesn't know about the boot?"

"No, Jipp doesn't know about the boot." Statler laughed inwardly, and thought: *You chump.*

Without another word Musgoes opened the door and watched Statler walk out into the alley.

CHAPTER XX

CORTLAND STATLER kept a bay gelding and a fine chestnut saddle horse at Ebernau's livery. But he owned no wheel or runner conveyance and he had his reasons for not owning any.

He chose Ebernau's green cutter for his trip to Grinsted's Blazing Stump and congratulated himself on his foresight as he watched the night man hitch the gelding to it. The high collar of his fur-lined overcoat would hide his face. Anyone who saw Ebernau's cutter on the roads or tied to Grinsted's rail could not be positive who was using it.

His spirits rose as he went through the outskirts of town. He had the improvident, day-by-day limited concern of the born speculator and gambler. Everything would be all right if he could get over the closest hump.

He intended to tell Jipp Grinsted of Wayne Musgoes' boot and the boot's heel. Naturally! Grinsted would not worry about Miller for less than $500 unless Grinsted saw danger to himself. But once he knew about the banker's boot and heel he would see danger. Then he would attend to everything. He would have to. For if Miller forced the arrest of Wayne Musgoes an explosion would follow which would blow Jipp Grinsted, his gang of henchmen, and the Blazing Stump out of the County of Woodbury. No amount of money or influence could muffle it.

Two cutters and a saddle horse were

tied at the Stump's rail as he slewed into the yard. The hour was early; he was glad of it, for a crowd never gathered until ten o'clock. He tied his horse and went to the back door. Light showed at the private card room window. He concluded the barroom might be free of curious patrons; entered quietly, halted at the barroom door, and surveyed the large room.

Pearl, the brunette percentage girl, slumped over a table at the far side—chin in her hands, elbows on the table, looking at a newspaper. Dope Hennessey polished a glass at the bar's near end and crowded aside to let his swamper out with a pail of water and a mop. No one else was in the room.

The swamper spilled dirty water on Dope's white apron; and Dope gave him hell. The percentage girl yawned over the boredom of Dope's swearing; and Statler moved in to the bar.

"Hello, Dope," he said.

Dope hitched his bulky self around. "Eh! Oh, good evening, Mr. Statler. You move around so quiet. Ain't you early? Only half past seven."

"Where's Jipp? In town?"

Dope dropped his polishing cloth and put the glass on the bar. Then he smacked his lips as he savored the taste of the answer he was framing. "No-o, Jipp, he ain't in town." He chuckled inwardly, shaking his fat belly. Now he smoothed his oiled hair with both coarse hands and raised his eyebrows. "No, Jipp, he ain't in town. Jipp's lucky he ain't in his grave."

The percentage girl laughed hoarsely and coughed.

Statler waited. Something lay behind this. Too many questions would make these cagey people more cautious.

"He's in bed, Mr. Statler." Dope twisted his mustache as he screwed up one eye. "He wouldn't mind if you know it."

"In bed! Not sick?"

"Yep, he's sick, Jipp is." Dope put an elbow on the bar and slouched down confidentially. "Jipp don't want it to get out. See? But listen—a fellow busted in here before sunup this morning and lit into Jipp for one God-awful licking. For Jipp, I mean."

"Who?"

Dope shrugged his free shoulder. "Now, that I wouldn't know. I was home. Nobody here but them as lives here—Rosey and Pearl and Slim and Mike. Slim, he was upstairs when this fellow got in. He can't hear nothing. I mean Slim can't. You know? Jipp's got him that way on purpose. Rosey lit out with him. I mean this fellow licked Jipp. He locked Mike and Pearl in the front card room while Rosey, she must of watched him wipe up the floor with Jipp. Then he takes off, Rosey with him; and Rosey packs along $300 of Jipp's money for herself."

"No-o."

"Yes." Dope lowered his voice. "He ain't never paid 'em hardly nothin', you know. Rosey and Pearl."

STATLER'S eyes narrowed, for he found this news interesting and smelled possibilities in it. "Hmm-m, I'll be damned. Funny anybody would come in here and beat up Jipp."

"Oh, I dunno. Jipp don't think it's so all-fired funny," Dope observed in a flat tone which indicated he was disappointed at the reception his news was getting. "He's got two black eyes. Two teeth gone. And he's so con-damned mad he can't even talk."

The girl came to the bar and spoke to Statler, who raised his hat. "Pearl," he said, "who was this disturbed the peace of Jipp's household?"

"Humpf! He was more man than you and Dope put together."

"We'll have a drink," Statler said pleasantly; and Dope turned to the back bar. "Did you see him?" Statler asked Pearl.

She nodded and brushed back her hair.

"And the fight?"

"How could I? I was locked up. But I heard it."

Now Dope pushed in against the bar and put a bottle of whiskey and three glasses on it. As Dope reached down to get a water pitcher Statler caught Pearl's quick glance at the safe. He turned his head and saw the shattered padlock and the hole in the wall.

"Holdup?"

"Ask Jipp your questions. I don't know nothing."

Dope straightened then. "Huh? Holdup? No, hell, the fellow was just mad, I guess. Shot up the place." He swung his arm toward the back bar. "Smashed bottles, glasses—Gawd! Look at the mirror."

Pearl and Dope downed their whiskey. Statler poured his into a glass of water and sipped the weak mixture.

"I'm going back and see Jipp." Statler clinked a ten dollar gold piece on the bar. "You and Dope have what you want, Pearl."

He walked down the hall and knocked twice on a door. Then tried the knob and found the door unlocked. He opened it quietly, went in, and shut the door.

Jipp Grinsted lay on his left side, face to the wall—a motionless hulk beneath soiled blankets. Statler rested his hands on the footboard of the bed. This disordered, dirty bedroom and its close air and odors nauseated him. He unbuttoned his overcoat and got his handkerchief and blew his nose. "Sick, Jipp?" he asked through his handkerchief.

He got no response and moved to the side of the bed and sat down. "That guard —Swanson's man—name's Miller—I've a notion he's dangerous. He knows Sweeney was mixed up in that other one. Miller was to see me this afternoon. He found—"

STATLER paused, for Grinsted had raised his head from the pillow and was swearing. "—was in here this morning," he finished, mumbling, scarcely moving his swollen lips.

Alert, Statler became tense. "He was," he said calmly. "Why?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"I'm afraid he's suspicious, Jipp. He'll tell Swanson about finding—"

"He won't tell nothing when I get through with him."

Grinsted screwed his head around; and Statler gasped at sight of his bruised and swollen face. "Miller has gone out in the Territory looking for the road agents. He figures to hit their trail if it takes until summer."

Grinsted sat up, groaned, and threw back the bed covers.

"What are you going to do?" Statler asked.

Grinsted ran his hand into the V of his undershirt. "Get myself in shape and go and shoot him in the Territory." He scratched his hairy chest. "If I have to chase him clear to the Black Hills. Which way 'd the cuss go?"

"He'll ford the Big Sioux at Braugier's Crossing tonight and stay at Lil's. Tomorrow he'll scout around the quarry looking for a gang hideout." Statler briefly told the puffing Grinsted Hub's plans as he heard them in his office. "He'll follow the Missouri way to Fort Pierre."

"He won't get that far."

"You going alone?"

"Hell, no!" Grinsted snarled through a grimace. "You think I'm crazy? You coming? Or ain't you hankering for a good killing?"

"Not especially. It's not exactly in my line." Statler jumped to his feet, rammed his hands into his overcoat pockets, and permitted himself a faint smile. "With Miller out of the way we won't have anything to worry about."

Grinsted grunted an oath. "Not from him, we won't. But that ain't why I'm shooting him."

Statler turned to the door and put his hand on the doorknob. The bed creaked. He looked back and waited until Jipp Grinsted had painfully eased himself to the floor. Nothing more needed to be said. His trip to the Blazing Stump had turned out better than he expected.

He stopped to say a few pleasantries to Dope and Pearl; then pleaded business for his haste and left.

His spirits were high as he untied his horse. He, himself, was $2,000 to the good. And Miller had at least one murderous cutthroat on his trail who would find him in the Territory and kill him by quick, sure shooting from behind. He found relief for his tension in that.

BUT, settled, in the cutter, the horse at an easy gate, the heat of his success cooled. Now questions prodded him with uncertainty. Why had Miller gone to the Blazing Stump and licked Jipp Grinsted? Why hadn't Miller told him of it? Why had he shot up the place? Why had he broken into the safe? Why had he taken Rose with him when he left? All did not make sense unless reasons lay behind it; and he did not know the reasons.

Then, suddenly, out of the stew of his doubts and uncertainties came thought of a worrisome possibility. He slapped the horse's rump with the reins. The horse jumped. The cutter flew over the road behind pounding hooves; and Statler let the gelding race until straggling houses at the edge of town shot by. Then he pulled him in and walked him to Ebernau's and gave the darky a dollar to blanket the steaming animal and bed him down with fresh straw.

He went into Ebernau's office and found the old man counting the day's change at his desk and mumbling into his white beard.

"Good evening, Charley," Statler said.

"Eh! Oh, hello there."

"Swanson's man, Miller—"

"Yep," Charley Ebernau prompted, his head shaking from his nervous affliction. "What about him?"

"He's a client of mine. Was he in here this afternoon to rent a mount?"

"No, he was in here and same as bought my best saddle horse. Effen he brings it back he's rented it."

"Oh, I see. Where'd he go?"

"Now, how would I know that?" The old man's voice had a twangfull of sarcasm. "Effen you was to ask me where he said he was going—like a good lawyer would—I'd say on Marcus Swanson's business. And what's Marcus Swanson's business is good enough for me."

Statler turned back to the office door. The old man did not like him, he knew. The crusty old fellow might bring up something unpleasant; and Statler was in no mood for that. "Thanks, Charley. Good night."

He walked slowly, thinking, to his office stairway. Old Charley Ebernau's words had relieved his apprehensions, but he still had uncertain possibilities to ponder. Now he put his mind back over all Hub had told him, testing each point against what he knew was true.

Presently he went in Carsten's hardware store and waited at the gun counter until Al, the night clerk, had sold a whale oil lantern to a bargaining customer.

Al came around behind the gun counter, palmed his bald head, and smiled expectantly at Statler. "Yes, sir, Mr. Statler, what can I do for you?"

"I've been thinking of buying a new deer rifle, Al. My Sharps is all right for horseback, but it's too heavy in the woods. Any of these new repeaters in?"

"Yes. Oh, yes. Two new ones from New Haven in last week." Al reached to the gun rack and handed a rifle with a magazine as long as its octagon barrel to Statler. "There's a new one. Isn't it a beauty? Mr. Winchester has started something with that one."

STATLER slowly worked the lever and heard, *ku—klux*. He pressed the lever home against the grip and heard, *klan*. He raised the arm to his shoulder and sighted at a hanging lamp in the rear of the long store. Then he looked closely at the barrel near the breech and saw: *44 Caliber—Model 1873.*

"Have you any ammunition for this new gun?" he asked and handed the rifle back to Al.

"Plenty." He produced a pasteboard box and pulled off the cover.

Statler saw: *Winchester—44 Caliber—40 grs. powder—bullet 200 grs. on the* box and fifty flat-pointed lead bullets protruding from brass shells upright in the box.

"Can't I sell you that rifle, Mr. Statler?"

"No, I guess not. Not tonight, Al. Just thought I'd look at one. Later, maybe."

He walked slowly to the door; opened it; and stood in the doorway. *The cuss told me he couldn't buy any 44-40 ammunition; and while he said it there was a whole case below us.*

Heavily he climbed the stairs to his office and felt his way through the dark and stale-smelling waiting room to the library. He lighted the hanging lamp over the table and went in his bedroom and in half darkness poured a drink of whiskey and water. He had not eaten since breakfast; but he couldn't stand the thought of food now. Was it possible this Miller was smarter than he?

In his private office he sat down at his desk with his hat and overcoat on and sipped his drink. Glancing at his desk he saw notes and mail Frank Wilkes had left for him. Without interest he fingered the envelopes and slips of paper until he saw an envelope marked: *Confidential.*

He opened this envelope and read the scrawl in violet ink:

> Cort: Old Mrs. Kelsey was in raising hell about bonds of hers she says you have. For God's sake do something about this quick before she swears out a warrant. I can't put her off. The bonds are down. She wants to sell them and get the money she needs. Murt.

Now the full weight of Statler's misery returned again. Wayne Musgoes had Mrs. Kelsey's six government bonds; and Musgoes would hang on to them for a week. It was part of the deal.

He got up and paced the floor; went into the library and strode back and forth.

Time! Time to marry Daisy Swanson! Time to mend his fences! To think! To plan! To cover up! To get money! Money! Money, money, money!

It all came back to the decision he had reached in Heinie Wesenberg's saloon. The only way he could get out of the jam he was in was to marry Daisy Swanson—Quickly!

He could not wait even a week; and Daisy had said a week or so before he could have an answer to his proposal.

SUDDENLY his face lighted with the hope of inspiration. Why wait a week? Why wait at all? Waiting was no way to handle women. They liked to have things given to them, but they also liked to have things taken away from them. They liked to have men wait on them. But no woman would be flattered by a man who obeyed an injunction to wait a week. What every woman wanted was a man who would not wait at all. Attention! To be made over. That was what every woman wanted. And he reasoned, after all, Daisy Swanson was no different than any woman, in those respects.

But, he knew, she was different from many women in certain respects. Once she became engaged she entered into a contract she would never break without dishonor. A contract as binding as her marriage vows; and to become engaged to Marcus Swanson's daughter could be almost as handy for his purpose as being married to her. As her fiance he could contrive long rides. Manage to get caught in a storm. Compromise her by staying all night in an out-of-the-way inn. She would have to marry him. Quickly. No matter what she heard about him. And if Daisy Swanson married him—come Hell and high water—she would stand by him.

He blew out the lamp; felt his way to the office door; locked it; and went to the street—jubilant again.

As he hurried up Fourth Street he assured himself this would be easy. Why hadn't he thought of it before? He would use a different technique this time. Daisy liked him. She must care for him, he decided as he reminded himself she had not protested when he kissed her. Night before last had been an off one—that was all.

Tonight he would sweep her off her feet. Would not even apologize for his informal call at this late hour—

He had neared Swanson's house. He slumped and ceased his dreaming; and slowed his pace as all his air castles came tumbling down to earth with him.

A half block ahead, across from the Episcopal church, a black saddle horse showed in dim light from a corner lamp post.

Statler walked to the horse and around it. A rifle boot hung at the right side of the saddle; and a rifle stock protruded from the boot.

He pulled the rifle out; and saw it was a repeater. A Winchester 44-40. He worked the lever down slowly and heard a cartridge clip from the magazine into the action. He closed the lever and felt the cartridge push into the chamber. He let the hammer down carefully and worked the lever quickly and caught the ejected cartridge. Maneuvering until he got light from the street lamp on the base of the shell he saw: 44-40. Angrily he threw the cartridge into a snow bank on the terrace. He held the rifle's hammer with his thumb and pressed the trigger and let the hammer down. Then he jammed the arm back in the boot.

HE STOLE up the driveway to a side window and looked cautiously in. Through the unlighted dining room he had a view of the lighted sitting room. Daisy sat at a spinet desk, a pen in her hand. Statler saw Hub standing beside her. Hub's buffalo coat was on the ottoman before the grate fire; and his black hat was on the coat. Statler saw Daisy look up at Hub and smile and put her hand on his arm; and then he saw her write.

He turned and walked slowly along Fourth Street to his office stairway. In his bedroom he took off his hat and coat. Then he undressed in the dark and went to bed; and ghosts of his rotten past came out of the darkness to keep him awake.

He began to know fear. The dreadful

fear of the unknown. But he would not give up; and, finally, he convinced himself everything would be all right. Tomorrow! Tomorrow his luck would change. Tomorrow was Sunday. Sunday was a good day to call on Daisy.

CHAPTER XXI

THE clock in the steeple of the Episcopal church intoned nine o'clock as Hub said goodbye to Daisy on Swanson's front porch. He saw her wave as he mounted Ebernau's black horse in front of the house; and he lifted his hat as he pulled the horse around and settled himself in the saddle.

Daisy had written a note to her father and promised to have it at MacLaren's for the camp team tomorrow. She had said she would take it down at noon or send Suwannee with it.

The note had been the last thing Hub had to attend to. He was ready to leave now; and rode west on a back alley to an inconspicuous north and south street. Following this past Saturday night noise from brawling river dives and shaded houses he struck the Military Road north of Sioux City and let his horse set its own pace.

Charley Ebernau had said Bill was his best saddle horse. Hub expected the average of about three miles an hour from him on a twenty mile trip, but was surprised. Bill tossed his head and seemed to enjoy stepping out along the snow-packed road.

The night had started with a gray sky in the west. Now, as Hub hit open country, only few stars showed. Faint light from a pale and clouded moon hugged the snow and reflected from bluffs on his left. There was a cold lonesomeness about this trip. He let his thoughts go back over pleasant things as Bill plugged along, shying occasionally at odors which drifted into his keen nose from the vast plains ahead.

Hub marked the way by a scattering line of telegraph poles which followed the pike to lonely outposts and army stations in the boundless country of the Dakotas and the Sioux. He planned on reaching Braugier's Crossing by half past twelve. But Bill kept a steady pace; it was barely midnight when they struck the Big Sioux River.

A lone farmer and his wife in a bobsled had been all the travelers he had overtaken. A few riders, sleighs, and farm sleds on their late way to Sioux City from lonely settlements and sod houses on the prairie had passed him. A half mile from the ford across the Big Sioux the night stage clattered up. Its swinging lanterns threw dancing shadows among the feet of six hustling mules. The guard leaned down from the driver's seat as the heavy Concord came opposite Hub, pointed his shotgun high to the northwest and shouted. But Hub could not catch what he said over noise of pounding hooves and the banging and slapping of the boot top.

He stepped Bill slowly into swift water of the ice-edged river. The spirited horse did not drink at first but sniffed shifting air currents moving in over dark water. Hub heard a cold wind overhead and knew it came out of the black wall to the northwest. Although he had heard of killing northers and blizzards he had never been in one for Swanson's camps were in the sheltered timber country.

As Bill splashed out of the ford and topped bluffs of the north bank Hub saw the lights of Black Lil's. His plans called for a stop there. Then to push on to the quarry before dawn.

Lil's log and sod barn stood about thirty feet from her two story square roadhouse. She did a fair business even in winter, when the trails were not blocked by snow. For her house was in the Territory; and the Territory had no bothersome laws or ordinances. Anything went. Men had been shot at Lil's bar in the front room for refusing a drink.

The stage stopped at her front door. Drivers of army and freight trains and travelers put up there. The place was famed for entertainment of all sorts. Lil was a genial but dangerous hostess who could shoot a man's ears off at twenty paces with a pistol. Men said she was called Black Lil because of her shining black hair and dark olive skin. Others said her nickname had been earned in moments when her cruel temper showed.

HUB fumbled in dark shadows and opened the plank door of Lil's stable after scouting the place. He let Bill in past him as an advance guard; and hardly saw the black horse but knew he found a vacant stall for he heard him rub stall posts. He found a lantern on a peg near the door and lighted it. Saw no saddled horses, but took the Colt from its holster and put it in his overcoat pocket. Should the men he wanted be here they would shoot on sight now that he was across the border.

He took the bit from Bill's mouth and gave him a fork of hay and a gourd of oats as a treat. As he talked to Bill the horse showed a friendly interest and his large eyes shone as if he knew excitement was at hand. Hub took a liking to the splendid animal and patted him while he checked the saddle girth, saddle bags, and Swanson's Winchester in the boot.

Now he left Bill and walked across a frozen windswept yard littered with trash and cordwood to the back door of the house. He opened the door and entered a large kitchen. A wood fire crackled in a range near the back wall. An old woman with stringy gray hair sat before the open oven. Her feet, in gray socks, were toasting on the oven door; and she smoked a clay pipe.

"Good evening," Hub said. "Where's the owner?"

"Good morning, you mean," the woman cackled and showed toothless gums. "Lil? She's in front. Talking to them two lazy teamsters been here most the week. They bed daytimes and drink all night. Lil's got all their money, but she's too chicken hearted to toss 'em out."

"Who else is here?" Hub asked.

"The girls and the hired man and me. Too much asking ain't good manners in these parts. What you want, boy, a room?"

"Not tonight, thank you. Any riders bound north stop here in the last three hours or so?"

"Nope." She spat in the woodbox. "You best stay. There's a storm coming. I can feel it in my bones and my corns hurt."

"I'm moving after I rest my horse."

"Where you bound? In or out?"

"Out," Hub said. Then, grinning down at her as he saw her old face wrinkle into a toothless smile: "To much asking isn't good manners. I'm chasing bandits."

She cackled a laugh. "Bandits? Hell! You'll have a hard time finding yours. The country's too full of 'em. Held up the night stage out of Pierre tonight. Go on in the front room." She indicated a door. "Lil and the girls'll want to see you."

Hub walked into the front room and saw a long bar against the front wall. A woman of arresting appearance sat on a high stool behind the bar. She strummed a guitar and sang in a low, husky voice. A six-shooter was on the bar before her. From her black hair and dark skin Hub concluded she was Black Lil.

A percentage girl and a half-drunk, red-shirted fellow danced aimlessly in the center of the room. A man who wore a fringed buckskin pullover sat at a card table with a percentage girl; and a third girl listlessly toyed with the keys of a battered piano near the wood heater.

LIL put down the guitar when she saw Hub. "Land of Goshen!" she exclaimed. "Here's a sober man." She smiled at Hub, showing even white teeth. "And a good cash customer," she added as Hub advanced to the bar and put a bill on it.

"I'm sober," Hub said, "but I don't know about the good cash part. Give everybody what they want. I'd like a cup of hot coffee and something to eat, if you have it. I'm planning on moving on."

Lil poured drinks for all but Hub and left for the kitchen. She came back soon with a tray bearing a coffee pot and cold chicken and put it before Hub at a card table. Then she got her gun and sat down across from him.

"I don't know when they'll try to hold me up," she said as she put the gun on the table. "You aren't going out on the plains tonight, friend, are you? Stage driver said he heard a storm howling off to the northwest."

Hub's plans required that he show his trail. So she could make no mistake he said: "I'm one of Swanson's men. Marcus Swanson. Know him?"

"I've heard of him."

"I'm after bandits who held up his payroll. Should be three or four of the gang ahead of me. I want to find them before they get into the Bad Lands."

He and Lil talked until she got up to pour another round of drinks at the bar. The thought came to Hub that it was dangerous here. The men he expected might arrive any minute. At one o'clock he decided his visit had served its purpose.

Lil went to the back door with him. "Listen, Mr. Miller," she said, "I'm afraid to let you go on. There's a storm due in here. If the wind should shift into the north—"

"I'll come back if I run into one," Hub said and bade her goodnight.

He made sure all loads were in the Winchester before he led Bill from the stable. The night had darkened, but he found he could still mark the road ahead by the line of packed snow which contrasted with dark prairie grass hugging the lines on each side.

The wind dropped down; he felt its vicious sting and pulled down his hat and turned up his coat collar. A mile or so into the teeth of it and he dipped into a gulley. Here the road ran through slapping buffalo brush. And then, out of the gulley and atop a ridge, a ripping wind carrying intense cold nearly blew him from the saddle. He had heard of men being lost in northers within a few feet of their homes. Of settlers freezing to death on their way from house to barn. Perhaps, he realized, he would have done well to have stayed at Lil's.

PRESENTLY Bill slowed; then stopped. Hub knew the horse was listening, though he could barely see its head. Now Hub heard a low sound, which at first he thought was strumming of telegraph wires. As he started Bill the sound grew louder and he recognized it as the moaning and whistling of wind. He felt the air turn colder; and now came terrific wind with stinging sleet in it; and he knew he was in a norther.

Bill stopped, spread his legs, and dropped his head. Hub had heard of horses and riders found frozen stiff on the prairies. If he could only get Bill going on his own the horse might find a way to shelter. Keeping the reins in his hand he slipped to the ground. The howling wind was so strong he could hardly stand against it and went down to his knees. Stiff, ice-coated spears stabbed his face. Prairie grass; and this meant he was off the trail.

Now he got his arms around Bill's neck and tried to speak to him. But the wind whipped his voice away before he could form words. He felt frozen strands of hair in the horse's forelock. Then it came to him that the animal's eyes must be frozen shut; and he knew no horse would move, unless led, with his eyes blinded.

He managed to work his right glove off with his teeth. The wind tore it away. He put his bare hand over Bill's eye and felt a film of ice; and he held his hand there, though he knew it would soon freeze, until he felt moisture. And he did this with Bill's other eye while he shielded the horse's head with his body.

Suddenly Bill shook his head. Hub clutched the check-strap and jerked Bill's head around. Now the horse swung with the wind. Hub knew if he could hold him there, mount and get Bill started with the wind the horse's instinct would lead him to the nearest shelter. It was his only hope; and he must get going before Bill swung into the wind again.

Now he found his legs and hands were numbing. The wind blew his buffalo coat so viciously it was protection only for his back. Death by freezing, he knew, came quickly. The victim felt the sting of cold, then passed into pleasant sleep and froze.

He could see nothing, not even Bill, but managed to find the left stirrup strap and finally got in the saddle. With his left foot in the stirrup and his right leg free he pounded Bill's flank and slapped his neck.

Now Bill started, the wind on his right. If the wind was still in the northwest it meant they were going west. Hub thought it could not be the direction of the road. But his judgment warned him to rely on the horse's instinct.

He leaned forward and yelled in Bill's ear: "Go on, Bill! Go on!" Then he beat his hands together and swung his arms; and found the wind nearly tore him from the saddle. So he got a grip on the pommel with his left hand and jammed his right inside his coat and thanked God he wore a coat of buffalo hide.

Now he felt the touch of snow on his face, though he could see no flakes. If Bill did not get him to shelter before much snow fell there was danger of floundering in drifts. He slapped Bill with his hands and feet; and Bill spurted. But that would not do; he must let the horse have his own way ungoverned, if he was to rely on its instinct.

HE CLUTCHED the pommel as Bill turned slightly right and put on more speed. The wind tore the top button of Hub's coat off and pelting snow and sleet made him shut his eyes and bend over. He felt cold working into his legs and feet and up his arms and a pleasant drowsiness came. He could not swing his arms and hang on too. And he had to keep his clutch on the saddle or he would fall off, for Bill was legging it with the wind now.

Hub did not know they had stopped until the horse shook himself vigorously. He roused enough to realize they were out of the wind, though he heard it overhead. Then he became conscious that Bill stood before something. He tried to straighten in the saddle, but found his coat and trousers were frozen stiff. His legs had no feeling and his gloved hand was frozen to the pommel. But he could move his bare hand inside his coat; and jerked it out, got his left foot clear of the stirrup, and managed to push himself over so he fell to the ground.

The fall seemed to shake life into him and he felt his way to Bill's head. Here he bumped into planks before Bill's nose; and he tried to laugh with relief. He found the wooden latch peg and pushed open a door. Bill rushed past, snorting; and Hub moved slowly into the darkness and shut the door.

He smelled the warm moist odor of animals and hay and edged along a sod wall to a corner. There he let himself slip down, not caring where he was nor what he slept on.

Old Angus MacTavish had known many surprises in his eighty years. He had received a few since he gave up boat building in St. Louis and built his sod house and barn on the prairies near the Missouri. But never in the lonely eight years he had spent in the Territory had he found a man asleep in his straw pile when about his sunrise chores.

He stroked his beard and looked down at Hub. Then, gently, he touched Hub's hand with the handle of his fork. Hub awoke and Angus said in a rich burr: "Get up, man. 'Tis sunup and a fine day after a wild night. Get up. Come in and set."

Hub stood up. "Where am I?"

"In Dakota Territory. Fifteen mile as the crow flies due north by west of Sioux City. On the land of Angus MacTavish, homesteader by government patent I never got 'til Ginrel Grant hisself was President. And a lonely old widower I be."

Hub, grinning sheepishly, brushed straw from his buffalo coat and unbuttoned it. He held out his hand and smiled at Angus, whose blue eyes above rosey cheeks were friendly.

"Well, Mr. MacTavish," Hub said, "I came in here on Black Bill over there in the storm. My name is Miller."

THEY shook hands and Angus said: "Now 'tis foolish to be caught out in northers on horseback, Mr. Miller. But ye are here and alive. I'll feed my animal friends and your Bill. Then we'll go in to breakfast. I've mutton chops and buffalo steaks to share. Plenty to eat and drink; and ye are welcome company."

As they left the sod barn—which looked like any prairie mound—Angus said: "Ye see that rope?" He pointed to a rope strung from the door frame of the barn to his sod house thirty feet away. "If ye had found that last night ye could have followed it to a warm bed. I keep it there so I don't get lost in blizzards such as last."

The interior of Angus MacTavish's sod house was neat and clean. He cooked a hearty breakfast while Hub rubbed snow and cold water on his frost bites and got his clothes in order.

Angus said the Military Road turned west past his south forty over the hill east of his house. Hub asked him to indicate which way was north; and saw the old man point out directions the reverse of those Hub thought were correct.

"Ye are turned entirely around," Angus said. "A man gets that way in a storm. But the Missouri is over there." He pointed left over his pole bunk. "And the sun is there on my right." He pointed over his stove. "So north is in back of ye—facing me."

Hub's watch showed eight o'clock when they finished breakfast and he prepared to leave after the dishes were washed. He had told Angus he was bound north looking for bandits. By careful questions he learned the quarry for which he was bound was about five miles north and he would know it by high limestone rocks along the Military Road. An old wagon trail led in to it. Another trail, now almost impassable, came in from the highway at the north. The quarry had not been worked for years. The area was used by hunters as camping grounds and bandits and highwaymen had used it as a hideout.

After Hub had settled himself in the saddle at the door of the sod house he reached down and shook hands with Angus. "I left a present for you, Mr. MacTavish, on your clock shelf. The next time you go to town I wish you would buy a quart of good Scotch whiskey with part of it."

"That will mean an extra trip to town, my boy. I go in twice a year. Now I'll go in before spring."

Hub found the Military Road as a white band through high prairie grass. The norther had ended in a light snowfall and most of the snowflakes had fallen after the wind died. Though he struck snowdrifts none were deep; and Bill plunged through them easily. No tracks showed; the snow on the road was undisturbed. Hub found satisfaction in that, for it meant the men he hoped to see had not gone through since he questioned the old woman at Lil's.

THE sun was well up in a clear sky when he came to the first of the limestone outcroppings. He found the road in to the quarry and turned Bill on it. He went a mile or so past high ledges and bluffs dotted with scrub pines and oaks and pulled Bill to a slow walk.

Now the terrain narrowed in and he saw timber ahead. He came to a high hill; and as he topped the crest of it saw country of the type for which he hoped. The trail ran down the hill and up a slight rise; then leveled off from the rise. Beyond the rise he saw old kilns of the abandoned quarry, indistinct in scattering trees and brush.

At the foot of the hill on his left was a sloping, rock-strewn bank which ended in a rock shelf. He saw that a man could get on this shelf and command a view of the trail to the kilns and to the crest of the hill—500 yards each way.

He started Bill down the hill, holding him to a walk and infrequent stops—to show the trail of a cautious rider. At the top of the rise he looked back and saw that Bill's tracks would show plainly to a man on horseback as soon as he reached the crest of the high hill.

Now he rode slowly to the kilns and looked over the country from there. On a knoll ahead were a few shellbark hickory trees. At the foot of the knoll spring water showed darkly against fresh snow. He let Bill walk ahead and waited while Bill nosed out a drink. Then he walked him to a hickory tree and pulled off an armful of bark. This fuel gave no smoke; and he counted on that in case he needed a fire.

A side of the nearest kiln had fallen away, so he chose it because of that. He hung Bill's harness inside the kiln and tied an end of one of his ropes around the horse's neck, using a bowline knot with a bight so the rope would not tighten. The saddle bag of oats he emptied on a flat stone near the kiln. With his lunch, hand axe, and hickory bark rolled in the bearskin robe he made a pack of it with harness straps and the other of his ropes.

He tied the loose end of Bill's rope to a sapling, adjusted his pack roll on his back, took his ammunition, and the Winchester, and walked back through the hickory grove. Bill followed to the end of his rope and whinnied. Hub considered the possibility of the horse whinnying at a crucial moment and decided if he did it might help.

Turning left on the far side of the grove of hickory trees he walked far in from the trail and struck a ridge. He followed the ridge toward the trail and went carefully until he saw the high hill. Then he cut through brush and high grass and came to the line of the trail and saw ahead of him the rock shelf he had chosen.

CAREFUL not to break saplings which might show to men on the trail and picking bare spots to walk on he reached the rock shelf and found it much roomier than he had thought. He scraped snow away with his feet and spread the bearskin robe hide down. He cut a few saplings in such manner that the stumps would not show and arranged a back rest. Then sat down on the robe for a trial and got himself in a reclining position which satisfied him. By turning the free ends of the robe over him he could be comfortable in any weather. He had shelter, food, and smokeless fuel; if necessary he could stay here a week.

Before him was a vast expanse of country which undulated away to a hazy blue horizon. At his right, 500 yards away, was a hill over which no one could ride without being seen by him. On his left, about the same distance, was Bill, whose actions would give warning of riders from that way. At his back was a wall of rock. And below him, within shooting range of twenty-five yards, was the trail where he could see riders but from which no one could see him.

Now he checked back over his strategy and found it made a good pattern. He suspected Cortland Statler was in some manner involved in the holdup and the shooting of Jack Springer. He had told Statler of Wayne Musgoes' heel and boot. He had let Statler know he was riding out in the Territory and to the quarry. If Statler was guilty a rider or riders would come over the high hill. Hub figured it would be today.

But the scheme had its chances. Killing was not to his liking, but he did not know how he would capture five men, if all the bandits came. He dared not shoot all who came, for he had no proof which would connect dead men with the crime. And the men who came, if any did come, might shoot him.

He looked at his watch and saw it was eleven o'clock. The day was Sunday. He wondered if Daisy would go to church. What Clara was doing in Denver. And now he had another problem—to stay awake and keep his eyes on the crest of the hill, for the sun was warm and he grew sleepy.

He built a tiny fire of hickory bark and heated a cup of coffee and slowly sipped it. An hour passed. The sun now shone in his eyes and he pulled his hat down to shield them. Glancing to his left he saw Bill pawing snow near the spring.

Now he turned his head and looked back to the hilltop, and jumped alert.

The head of a horse and the black hat of its rider bobbed into view over the crest of the hill.

The rider, on a brown mount, wore a sheepskin jacket. He came into full view; and two more riders topped the hill. Both wore black hats. The one on the far side wore a black woods coat. The other wore a sheepskin pullover, leather side out.

Hub slipped out of his overcoat; grabbed the Winchester; cocked the hammer.

The three riders walked their horses slowly down the hill. The one in the lead rode ahead by a rod. The two behind him were abreast of each other. The one on the far side was a heavy man with big legs in buckskin riding trousers and boots. The nearest rider was thin and slightly stooped. Each of the two abreast held a rifle upright in his right hand with the butt resting against his hip.

ALL three sat their horses tensely on guard, studying the road and country ahead of them—plainly on a manhunt. The one in the lead rode easily. He reached down and pulled a rifle from the boot at his saddle horn and pointed ahead with the rifle. Then all three riders went on ahead slowly.

Bill whinnied. The three men reined up directly below Hub—a perfect shot. He could kill all three before they knew where the shots came from.

Now the man in the lead jerked his horse around and waited for the two to come up. But they hung back.

Hub raised the rifle. His heart quickened. The heavy man on the roan at the far side was Jipp Grinsted. The wiry one on Grinsted's left was Bart Sweeney.

He knew who four of the holdup gang were.

And the fifth man, in a dirty, canvas, sheepskin-lined jacket, was directly below him, facing his way.

Hub had the sights of Swanson's Winchester flat on the fellow's chest.

CHAPTER XXII

CORTLAND STATLER followed a set routine on Sundays. He rose promptly at nine and dressed. Then he packed clean clothes in a valise and went to his barbershop for a steam bath in its public bathroom. After his bath and a shave he ate a light breakfast in the dining room of the Ridings Hotel. Sunday afternoon, unless invited to dinner, he invariably rode into the country. In the evening he went calling; and he never gambled on Sunday. Why, he did not know.

This Sunday he disregarded the routine. He had arisen before nine. His head ached. The ghosts of his past, whose taunts had kept him awake most of the night, haunted him now. To listen to prattle of a colored bath attendant and a clammy-fingered barber this Sunday morning was unthinkable, in the mood he was in.

He went to the washroom at the back end of the hallway and filled a copper kettle with rain water from the attic tank. While it heated on the wood stove in his library he stropped his razor and trimmed his mustaches before the mirror in his bedroom. Then he shaved and took a sponge bath and dressed with his usual care.

By the time church bells rang for noon services he had eaten breakfast in an obscure lunchroom and was considering a call on Daisy. Last night had been a disappointment. Yet he dared not give up.

It would be unconventional to call at noon; and Daisy might well resent it. On the other hand a little unconventionality might shake her out of her complacency and help to win a favorable and speedy answer to his proposal of marriage. One way or the other, he must have an answer soon. Murt Melvig's note worried him. It called for immediate action. Old Mrs. Kelsey might go to the State's Attorney any minute. And this damn Miller! No telling what Miller might do and what might happen.

At half past twelve Statler left his office. He walked north on Fourth Street, using the side across from Swanson's residence. The day was pleasant, its noon sun warm in a clear sky. Icicles melted at porch ends of old houses and shingles steamed on the south slopes of roofs.

Daisy would be tripping across the street from church by the time he reached her block. He could mingle with Episcopalians on the cross walk, meet her, and casually accompany her home. She would ask him in, might even invite him to dinner. And she would be in a receptive mood. Women, he had concluded, always were more charitable after an hour or two of church ritual.

Thinking of it, his spirits rose; and shattered hope now built air castles. Again his dreams dwarfed his troubles and his fears with their magnificence.

A half block from the Episcopal church he saw the old warden open the high, black doors and place stone stops to hold them open. Now Statler heard the organ rumble the Recessional Hymn. Voices of the choir came through open doors. Statler heard George Heath's words, now over a hundred years old:

"My soul, be on thy guard;
"Ten thousand foes arise;
"A host of sins are pressing hard
"To draw thee from the skies."

His mother had sung the hymn when he was a mere boy. The words, as he heard them plainly, seemed meant for him. He knew momentary terror. He must be losing his nerve.

For an instant, but only an instant, an inner spring of his better self made him wish he could clean up his life. But he knew he could never do it. Evil was part of him. Like genius in some men, evil had been implanted in him. Through his heredity. By some dominant ancestor long before his impecunious doctor father met his school teacher mother. And nothing on this earth could ever change him.

He saw the minister at the top of the high front steps. Noon sunshine of this springlike day glistened on the good man's bald pate as he shook hands with his flock. Groups of parishoners gathered on the front walk. Plain and simple folk mostly, who went about their business in this frontier town in a new country with righteous zeal. Farmers who had driven in long miles across the prairies for a day of rest in town.

NONE of them had anything much to contend with, Statler supposed. Except falling prices, honest debts, ailing wives, unpaid mortgages, and babies.

He recognized a few of the townspeople. Hypocrites! Church-going hypocrites all! Ira Jones! Went to church every Sunday. Even passed the plate and ushered. Statler expected any day to be called upon to settle a bastardy charge against the sanctimonious and talented sinner. Old Cumrock! Shaking hands. Bowing to black-gowned women. The old toad owned half the houses on Jones Street. Madams and bawds had told Statler so.

He, himself, he decided, was not so reprehensible. And he had what these church-going sinners did not have. He had brains. Ability! If he could only get his head above the mire he was in.

But he did not see Daisy; and concluded she had not gone to church.

He crossed to the corner and walked to Swanson's. As he started up the steaming boardwalk to the front steps Suwannee appeared on the narrow walk which led to the back door. She buttoned her coat with one hand, evidently in a hurry. In her other hand she held a white envelope.

"Hello, Suwanee," Statler greeted her. "Didn't Miss Daisy go to church?"

"Yassuh. Howd do, Mist Statlah," Suwannee managed, out of breath, her black eyes glistening. "She's gwine stay 'til mos' aftah one foah a meetin' of Sunday school teachahs. Ah mos' fohget dis hyah note foah her pa ahs to take foah team. She'll tell me fust thing: 'Suwanee, youall take that note? An' mah roas' a dryin' up in mah oven."

Note for Swanson! Statler had seen Daisy writing for Hub last evening. "I'll take the note for you, Suwannee. I'm going past MacLaren's on my way back."

"Oh-h! You would, Mist' Statlah? That's mos' kind an' considerable of youall." When Suwannee tried to ape her adored mistress her tongue was not always equal to remembered words. "Ise gwine naow an' baste mah roas'."

Statler slipped the envelope into an overcoat pocket and walked directly to his office. He poked the fire in the library stove to a bed of coals and placed his copper kettle directly on the coals. In a moment the small amount of water in the kettle boiled. He placed the kettle on top of the stove and steamed the envelope open.

Now he took off his hat and overcoat and put them on the library table. In his private office he sat down at his desk.

Deep in him lay smothered a vestige of honor. For a brief moment it cried out at this thing he was about to do. But he stifled it quickly. The note, no doubt, had been dictated by Miller. He had a defensive right to know Miller's plans. And Daisy's part in them.

WITHOUT more hesitation he unfolded Daisy's note to her father and read:

Dear Father:

Lieutenant Miller is here and wishes me to write you again for the Sunday evening team. He says it is not necessary to look for the early morning team; and MacLaren's, as you know, is not open until after church on Sundays.

Hub expects to leave tonight to try a plan he thinks will find the men who held him up. He wishes me to say that he is riding into Dakota Territory and may be gone several days. He says to tell you if his scheme works it will prove who killed Jack Springer and robbed your payroll.

He has left your horse and cutter at Ebernau's and rented a saddle horse there on your credit. He intends to arrest Wayne Musgoes when he gets back. I believe he suspects another prominent man, but he won't say so until he is positive.

Yours,

Daisy

P. S.

I suspect this man, too. I wonder if you do also.

P. S. S.

Never say again that Cortland Statler is a prospect for a husband. Because he isn't! Not with me!

D.

Rage seized Statler. Anger over his own bungling stupidity and incompetency. Swearing, he jerked Daisy's note into shreds and threw them and the envelope into his wastebasket. Damn this Miller! The cuss had tricked him.

He is smarter than I thought. And then the unacceptable conviction: *He is smarter than I am.*

Now fear replaced his rage. It was possible—rather, quite likely—that blundering Jipp Grinsted, the cowardly, dirty, clumsy, thick-headed oaf, would get himself caught in an ambush Miller had planned. If Grinsted did, the whole jig would be up. Cornered, caught, Grinsted would tell all he knew to save his own hairy neck. And the same was true of any of his hirelings.

Statler wished now he had never known Wayne Musgoes. Nor Jipp Grinsted. Had never settled in Sioux City.

He thought of Daisy's note; and snorted. Obviously, from statements in the note, Daisy's answer to his proposal would be a flat *no*. If she ever gave him her answer.

His face reflected his internal anger. All these things had to happen almost at once and now there was the matter of Daisy. As he sat there, his frustration became overwhelming.

His rage returned blackly. Now it centered on Daisy, Wayne Musgoes, and Hub. *Damn it!* Why had he treated Daisy Swanson any differently than any other woman? He had given her all; she had returned nothing.

Musgoes! *The damn, sniffling, canting Methodist hypocrite.* Had stolen half a bank. Probably at church even now, praying.

And Miller! The lying meddlesome pup. To pretend to be seeking the advice of Swanson's lawyer, when all the time Miller's story was merely a hoax to fool him.

Damn them! He would show them. Get them, by God! But how?

All his fear left him now as cold, calculating rage overwhelmed him. His nerve came back; and with nerve came the help of his scheming brain.

HE WISHED he might sight a rifle at Miller right now. It would be a pleasure to pull the trigger and see Miller go toppling over. Too late now to ride out in the Territory and shoot the cuss. Grinsted would have left last night or early this morning. Whether the fates willed Grinsted was to get Miller or Miller was to get Grinsted, it had been done by now.

If Grinsted had blundered into luck—if Miller was dead—But no, cold reasoning assured him. *Miller is too smart. He'll get Grinsted. Probably has him by now. That means my goose is cooked.*

Though he could not be sure; he knew he could not wait. If Miller got back to town—

Statler jumped to his feet. Only one course was open to him now. He must get money somehow and leave Sioux City before Hub Miller returned.

He had $2,000 he had extracted from Musgoes, and $500, nearly all of which belonged to a farmer client. A few hundred in his safe. But $3,000 or so was not enough to get him out of this accursed town and to a new start in the far West.

Wayne Musgoes owed him $4,000 as his share of the holdup loot. But Musgoes would not release it for a week or until the expected government agents checked his bank.

Mrs. Kelsey's government bonds! Wayne Musgoes would hold on to all six, too. It was part of the deal. He might have to wait—

But he could not wait. If this damn Miller got the drop on Jipp Grinsted and whoever rode with him, Miller might be back in town tonight.

Now he thought again of Murt Melvig's note about old Mrs. Kelsey's $6,000 of government bonds; and he smiled as he saw advantage in the note. He could show it to Musgoes and scare the damn banker out of his wits. Government bonds were down, but as good as money. He could cash them in St. Louis, win a fortune at poker, and beat it into the lawless West.

He got up and walked into the hall and to a front window. On the street he saw people returning to their homes from church. At his right on the corner across the street he saw the front windows of Wayne Musgoes' bank. The banker seldom went to his bank on Sundays before evening. Statler counted as slim any chance of seeing Musgoes at the bank before late afternoon. And he had to see Musgoes. At the bank, too.

Now he went back to his private office and scrawled a note to Frank Wilkes. It ran:

Sunday

Dear Frank:

I'm driving to Sioux Falls this afternoon. If it should happen I'm not back in two weeks, you count me out and take over. Sell what you want to sell. Keep what you want to keep. You alone have understood me and I wish you success.

C. S.

HE PUT the note in an envelope, addressed the envelope to Frank Wilkes, Esquire, Attorney and Counsellor at Law, sealed the envelope, and propped it up on Frank Wilkes' desk in the waiting room alcove.

In his bedroom he packed his newest clothes and such small belongings as he treasured in two portmanteaus. He took a carpetbag and a folding leather valise to his office. Went carefully through his desk and safe, putting papers he wanted in the bag and valise, leaving those of no value. Incriminating documents, and those likely to be, he ruthlessly threw in the library stove.

Now he put on his fur-lined overcoat and black felt hat and left the office. At Ebernau's livery he ordered his two horses hitched to a double sleigh. His saddle horse was driving broken. Each splendid animal would bring better than $200 in the Council Bluffs or St. Louis markets, even in these times. And Charley Ebernau's sleigh was good for $50. The chestnut saddle horse had cost him $400. He might keep him.

He went to the nearest lunchroom and ate a piece of dried apple pie and drank a cup of coffee. Back at Ebernau's he gave the stableman a dollar and told him he would not be back until late. He drove to the rail in front of Carsten's hardware store and tied the horses to it, throwing one of Charley Ebernau's horse blankets over each.

Then he went to his office, carried a chair from the waiting room to the front hall window and arranged it so he could sit in it and see Musgoes' bank. With his hat and overcoat on against the musty chill of the hall, a cigar in his mouth, he sat down.

Now he knew his utter loneliness and his thoughts were bitter. There was not a soul on earth he could ask for help. As he contemplated his misery he grew nervous and wished he could pace the hall.

But it wouldn't do to leave the window. He lighted the cigar and settled in the chair. He intended to sit there until a light showed in Wayne Musgoes' bank if he jumped out of his skin with nervousness.

CHAPTER XXIII

HUB saw the sheepskin-coated rider in front let his horse move ahead toward Jipp Grinsted and the hatchet-faced Sweeney as Grinsted motioned him back.

The fellow stopped his horse. Now the three horses stood noses together. All three men talked in low tones, rifles in their right hands, reins in their left. Hub saw Grinsted point left with his rifle; then back the way he had come. And now he started to turn his horse, but something said by the man in the sheepskin coat, who faced him, held Grinsted.

Hub had front and rear sights of Swanson's Winchester lined on the chest of the front rider. The new rifle had a slow, easy trigger pull. If he squeezed his hand the hammer would strike down against the firing pin. A heavy lead bullet would spin from the muzzle and tear through the sheepskin coat of the unsuspecting rider who sat his horse and listened to Jipp Grinsted.

The man would tumble from his saddle —dead—before the *boom* of the shot had ceased reverberating among the high cliffs and ledges of the quarry. The riderless horse would plunge ahead. Get in the way of Grinsted and Sweeney. Throw them into confusion. Force them to surrender or be shot.

Hub could tie the arms of each and lead them on their horses to Murt Melvig at Sioux City. A statement to the sheriff of what Hub knew would force a confession or confessions from one or both. Then to arrest Cortland Statler and Wayne Musgoes; and his job would be done.

And it should be done quickly. Now! The riders were getting ready to move in on some plan. It was the only thing he could do and do safely. For he could not get all three riders to Sioux City alive. And he had not forgotten the cold-blooded killing of Jack Springer. One of these men or Cortland Statler or Wayne Musgoes had deliberately done that.

The fact the fellow whose sheepskin jacket Hub saw over the Winchester's sights had unquestionably been in the holdup was enough to justify shooting him. The thing Hub should do, he knew, was kill this man; then quickly drop Sweeney. And wound Grinsted.

But he could not do it in that manner. It was one thing to shoot a fleeing criminal. Or to kill a man in self defence. But to send a bullet tearing through this unsuspecting man below him without any warning was too much like murder.

I can't do it. He eased his finger from the trigger; and knew he threw away an opportunity for a chance and a risk. Tossed it away. *I'm not sure they're looking for me.*

"Heigh! You three!" he yelled. "Drop your guns and reach for the sun. You're covered."

The effect was not immediately apparent. All three men sat motionless—shocked into immobility.

Sweeney tightened his reins first. Then the rider in the sheepskin coat jerked his horse up on the horse's hind legs and swung the animal toward Hub.

Grinsted swore loudly; jammed his horse into Sweeney's. Sweeney's horse turned left. Both sprang around. Hub saw them spurt as Grinsted and Sweeney drove spurs into moving flanks. Grinsted dropped down on the far side of his horse. Only his head and right shoulder showed. Sweeney leaned forward, hugged his horse's neck, so his head was protected by the neck of the plunging horse.

As both horses raced frantically up the hill Hub got his front sight on Grinsted's bobbing head. But found he could not keep it there for even the fraction of a split second. He tried a snap shot; and knew he had missed cleanly.

He worked the lever. Then saw Grinsted jerk upright and throw his arms wide. His horse lunged down in the snow ahead of Sweeney; and Grinsted pitched over his horse's head.

Sweeney's horse tried to clear the thrashing animal in his path and jumped left in a wide leap. Hub saw Sweeney spin around and fall from his saddle. And now Hub swung left to cover the third man.

HUB had heard no shots, so concentrated had he been on dropping the fleeing Grinsted and Sweeney, or one. Amazed now, he saw the man in the sheepskin coat off his horse. Standing in the snow. His horse in brush beside the road.

The fellow dropped his rifle; faced toward Hub; shot both arms straight up.

Hub put the sights on him. "Drop your gun belt. One hand! Turn around. Back to me. That's it. Stay that way, or I'll shoot."

Hub picked up his rope; moved to the end of the rock shelf and went part way down the slope. "That was good shooting, friend. Who are you? Why did you do it?" The fellow did not answer. Hub moved forward. "Turn around now." as the man swung around Hub saw his long white face and black eyes. A mere boy and a sullen one. The boy tried a smile, but quickly stopped it. "You can drop your hands," Hub said. "Why did you do that, boy?"

"I was getting tired of Jipp Grinsted's dirty work. He had plenty on me and I had to do what he said. . . . We thought you were ahead near your horse. Least Jipp did. I said 'no'; you were scouting or drawing us on. Grinsted and Sweeney were going to sit here and plug you while they sent me in to drive you out."

"What's the real reason?"

"Well—" The boy grinned slightly. "You had me, didn't you? I'd go past you last, unless I turned. But I wanted to get Jipp Grinsted anyway. He had jipped and theatened me long enough. After I got him I had to get Sweeney, too. Didn't I? Or you might save Sweeney and shoot me. You could have plugged me and downed Sweeney's horse. Maybe I can turn State's evidence. You can't prove anything with them dead, without me."

"It may work," Hub said; and knew a measure of admiration for this youngster. "Who are you?"

The boy threw back his coat and showed a star on his blue flannel shirt.

"One of Melvig's deputies, eh? Your name?"

"Poke Smith. I was Grinstead's tipoff man and his best shot. But I never got my share out of any job."

"Was Murt Melvig in on this business?"

Smith shook his head. "Un-ugh! I'm sure of that. Do I get off if I come through?"

"You may. Who shot the driver Friday afternoon?"

"Sweeney. For a licking you gave him at Swanson's. He thought the driver was you."

"Then I don't have to kill anyone now."

"Not unless it's Cortland Statler."

"Are you sure of that, boy?"

SMITH nodded. "I was there. All three times. He shot the second messenger. You could have dropped me?"

"Easy. But I guess I'll have to save you for Murt Melvig to talk to. Do as I say, Smith, and I'll turn you over to Sheriff Melvig and ask him to recommend to the State's Attorney to charge you easy. That is if you confess fully. Is it a deal?"

The youngster's sullen face brightened. "It sure is."

Hub had him bring down the robe and other things on the rock shelf. They walked down to the kiln and harnessed Bill. Hub had Smith lead Bill back ahead of him to the dead men and Smith's horse.

"Your ball got Grinsted in the neck and went through into his horse's head," Hub said. "Sweeney got his through the back. We'll leave them here. Sheriff can send out and get them, if he wants to. Sweeney's horse will follow us in. What became of the holdup money?"

"I don't know. Grinsted got $3,000 of it. I ain't seen any. He said we had to get you first."

Smith bent over Grinsted, rolled him over. "He's bled like a stuck pig," he said. He reached into Grinsted's pockets.

"Here's his wallet. Keys."

"Put them in your pocket and turn them over to Murt Melvig," Hub ordered. "Now mount your horse and ride ahead of me."

Hub put Smith's rifle in his boot and kept Swanson's Winchester in his right hand. By two o'clock they were on the Military Road. Hub kept Smith about twenty-five feet ahead of him until they came to Angus MacTavish's. They stopped there for talk and hot coffee. At Lil's Hub tied Smith's arms behind his back and rode closer to him now.

The sun was down and dusk was on its way when they saw the first hills north of Sioux City. Darkness had come and street lamps were lighted as they rode into town and to the rail in front of Murt Melvig's office.

THIS Sabbath afternoon had faded deceptively. Dusk had come furtively—stealing in after lagging daylight reflected on blue and springlike skies from a lingering sun below an unclouded horizon.

Wayne Musgoes had not realized his evening routine at the bank was due until old Stonedef—his German housekeeper—banged in from housing her chickens for the night. He had fretted himself out of a nap on the sofa in his sitting room. Worries plagued him as he yawned into his overcoat in the hall. He knew they threatened his health. And he knew, too, his were of his own causing.

A town lamptender lighted a whale oil lamp on a post at the Fourth Street corner as Musgoes neared the bank. To avoid having to talk to the fellow he went to the alley and the back door—a habit he followed more and more lately. His conscience shamed him and he knew he was a coward and he took his keys from his pocket and unlocked the door wishing he could hold his head up and meet his fellowmen.

He filled the lamp on the counter before the black iron door of the vault and lighted it. Adjusted the wick to a measured point years of this custom had taught him was right to burn all night; and unlocked the iron door.

Inside the vault—dark and silent as a tomb—he opened a castiron safe. In this he kept cash and stocks and bonds, which were, after all, not his, but his depositors'. He took the bank's ledger and a small iron chest which held the bank's securities and placed them on the table in his office. Then lighted the lamp and pulled down the shades at windows behind the chair.

He had figures to alter, balances to arrange. For the government's meddlesome agents would be poking inquisitive noses into his affairs next Tuesday or Wednesday; and he was not quite ready. He also had a letter to write.

He got the 44 six-shooter from his teller's counter shelf and put it on the office table. Bank robberies were common; bankers had been shot. And, too, the big ivory-handled gun on the table would give him a sense of security and help to dispel a feeling of loneliness his silent office and ghosts of his sins gave him.

As he opened the iron chest its cover clanged loudly in stillness of this back room. He saw Cortland Statler's collateral security—Mrs. Kelsey's six $1,000 government bonds—which he had switched to bank assets, in the chest. Sight of the red and orange paper of the top bond brought thought of his own defalcations. But quickly he exchanged for all such thoughts ones of pity for himself. Certainly his misdeeds—he had decided weeks ago—were only those of any victim of circumstances.

Now he found the bookkeeping job he had to do distasteful. Though aware that procrastination was dangerous with the government men due, he chose to do the easy task first.

Sighing, he sat down in his chair, took a pen, dated a sheet of notepaper, and started a letter to a St. Louis banker friend. He had written half the first sentence—*I expect to be at the Planters' Hotel in St. Louis this coming weekend*—when he heard an imperative knock on the back door. He jammed his pen into a spring penholder and slipped the notepaper into a partly open drawer.

The knock sounded again. Loudly this time. Swearing under his breath Musgoes went to the door.

"Who is it?"

"Cort, Wayne. Let me in."

"What do you want?"

"Let me in and I'll tell you."

Musgoes unlocked the door and Cortland Statler walked in—almost jauntily, his face showing no worry—and waited until Musgoes had locked the door.

They walked to the office. Musgoes dropped his ring of keys on the table, and sat down, a frown on his pale face.

STATLER moved up and rested his fingertips on the table. "Grinsted is out after Miller."

"I don't want to know anything about it."

"Humpf! I thought you might be interested."

"What do you want now, Cort?" Musgoes' irritation showed in his voice. This damn Cortland Statler was becoming a pest. "More money?"

"No. Bonds."

"Bonds! What bonds?"

"Those right there." Statler pointed to the open chest on the table at his left. "Mrs. Kelsey's six thousand dollars worth I borrowed from her to loan to you."

"What in hell are you talking about?"

"This." Statler handed Sheriff Melvig's note to Musgoes. "Read it."

Musgoes read aloud:

> Cort: Old Mrs. Kelsey was in raising hell about bonds of hers she says you have. For God's sake do something about this quick—before she swears out a warrant. I can't put her off. The bonds are down. She wants to sell them and get money she needs. Murt.

Musgoes scowled up at Statler. "Well?"

"Well?" Statler mocked.

"What can I do about it?"

"Let me take the bonds."

"Let you take the bonds! With the government men coming here next week?"

Musgoes handed Murt Melvig's note to Statler. As Statler put it in his pocket he said: "For only a day. I'll show them to her. Tomorrow. Tell her I'm sending them in to be sold. That'll keep her quiet. I'll bring them back tomorrow night."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"Dammit, I said—no!"

"Why not?"

"Cort, I can't trust you. I got to thinking last night. You jipped me on that money for Grinsted. He'd kill anybody for $500. If he knew about my boot and heel he'd do it in the Territory for nothing."

Statler laughed.

"Did you tell Jipp Grinsted about my boot and heel?"

"I thought you didn't want your name mentioned even among thieves—or, ah—co-partners in our little affair. Didn't want to know anything about Mr. Miller's—elimination."

"Did you tell Grinsted about my boot and heel?"

"No."

"Did you give him the $2,000 I gave you to give him?"

"You didn't give it to me to give Grinsted. You gave it to me to get Miller out of the way. Isn't that right?"

"Did you give it to Jipp Grinsted to get Miller killed."

"Ask me if Miller is eliminated. The word is less gruesome than killed."

"Well?"

STATLER snorted. "You'll know soon enough if he isn't." He saw Musgoes cringe. "But we're talking about Mrs. Kelsey. We can't get her shot; and she's as dangerous as Miller."

"How so?"

"If she has me arrested I'll talk to save my own neck," Statler answered and pursed his lips. "You'll need a lawyer if I talk; and I can't defend you for compounding a felony if I'm in jail. Better let me take those bonds for a day."

"Dammit, let me think about it."

"I'll take 'em anyway," Statler said and reached into the chest, "while you think about it."

"Leave those alone!"

Musgoes jumped to his feet. Clutched for Statler's hand. But too late. Swiftly. Statler had put the six bonds in the inside pocket of his overcoat.

"Damn you, Cortland Statler, I'll, I'll—You, you—crook! Give me those bonds and get out of here!"

"Don't yell so, Wayne. Somebody might hear you."

"It was part of our deal I keep those bonds for a week. By God, you put them back, or I'll—!"

As Musgoes reached for the big gun Statler's quick hand darted to the ivory grip. "Careful, Wayne." Statler had his finger on the trigger now, his thumb on the hammer. He raised the gun level with Musgoes' chest. "I'll be damned if I'll let anyone shoot me for six thousand dollars of bonds. I'll keep this gun, too. You can get it from Frank Wilkes tomorrow."

Musgoes face reddened with anger. Now it became purplish. He grabbed the gun barrel with his right hand and reached over the table for Statler with his left.

As Musgoes jerked on the gun barrel and twisted the gun in Statler's hand Statler saw him grimace. Suddenly Musgoes clapped his left hand to his chest.

"God—my heart!" he exclaimed.

Statler involuntarily jerked back. "What's the matter?" he cried as he saw Musgoes' look of anguish.

And then—*Wha-a-ap.*

Before the gun's report had registered with Statler as having come from the smoking gun in his hand, Musgoes collapsed into his chair. Red foam showed on his lips as his mouth opened; and his head dropped to his chest and rolled to one side.

Statler heard a long gurgle echo in Musgoes' throat as he watched him, horrified. Now Statler stared at the six-shooter in his hand. "Jesus!" he exclaimed aloud. "Did I shoot a dead man or did a dead man shoot himself?"

HE SAW blood ooze out on Musgoes' gray vest; and now he seemed to be before a jury in a jury box, and he heard himself say: *We shall prove Wayne Musgoes was not murdered. We shall convince you beyond shadow of doubt that he committed suicide.*

Coolly he placed the gun in Musgoes' lap and put Musgoes' right hand on the gun's ivory handle. He shut the cover of the iron chest, opened the ledger on the table before Musgoes; and now he stepped out of the office into the shadows in the counting room and listened.

No sound of running feet or noise of anyone at the locked doors came to his thumping ears. Presently he became convinced the shot had not been heard outside the bank.

He must take time to consider this thing. Government men would find a shortage in the bank's assets. The bond account for one, would be short Mrs. Kelsey's bonds. Ah! In the shortage would lie the reason for Wayne Musgoes' self destruction.

He thought of the open vault and safe. Would Musgoes have left them open? Would he have left the chest full of securities on the table? A man about to commit suicide?

For the life of him he could not decide. Finally he decided to leave things as they were and get out of there.

But now, as he went to the back door, he found himself trapped in a dilemma. He would have to lock the door from the outside. That meant he must take Musgoes' key with him.

When this business was discovered tomorrow morning and investigated, absence of the key—or all Musgoes' keys, for that matter—would scream murder. For, with the door locked and Musgoes' key missing —it would not take a legal mind to deduce that someone other than Musgoes had locked the door.

On the other hand, if the door was found unlocked—that, too, would look like murder. And by a person known to Musgoes—a man he would let come in.

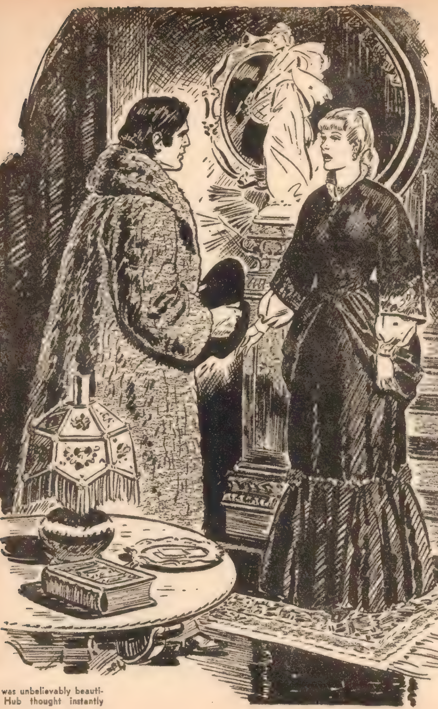
As Statler considered the two alternatives with which he found himself faced he grew panicky. For one seemed as incriminating as the other. And where the untrained mind would have seen no risk or would have disregarded risk his saw damning evidence.

He intended to leave Sioux City forever tonight. He and Musgoes were known to be close. Mrs. Kelsey, Murt Melvig, and others would talk when news got out that Wayne Musgoes was dead—shot in the heart, and his bank was short.

Statler knew suspicion would be directed toward him, if murder was suspected. One thing would lead to another. He would be sought. Traced! Pursued! Caught! By a United States Marshal with a Federal warrant wherever he went.

He felt his knees shake, his legs grow weak. With an effort he jerked himself erect and made his choice. Musgoes could have rushed into the bank; left the back door unlocked; and shot himself. The unlocked door would look suspicious, but it was the least suspicious looking. He would take Musgoes' keys, unlock the door, put the keys back on the table, and go. *They'll never notice the unlocked door,* he thought. *Or they'll think he left it unlocked on purpose to make it look like murder.*

YET he knew these things did not make sense—a banker leaving his



She was unbelievably beautiful, Hub thought instantly door unlocked, while he sat in his office all night—dead. But, Statler reasoned, neither did a locked door and no key make sense.

He went to the office. Musgoes' body had slumped down in his chair. Only the head and shoulders showed above the low back rest.

Statler took the keys. As he turned away he saw the chest and thought of Mrs. Kelsey's bonds. Now it struck him that the six government securities would be listed among the bank's assets. Their absence from the chest would certainly be noticed.

It would not do—this taking the bonds. But now he found himself engulfed in another dilemma. He needed all six bonds; and he dared not put them back. For with the bonds on hand the bank might not be short, or enough so to explain suicide by its owner. The holdup had put Musgoes, he knew, in fair shape. Perhaps a little shortage. But that would be passed in these times.

Quickly he reached a decision. He would keep the damn things. But even as he reached the decision, his mind warned: *They'll find out I hocked them; they'll suspect I took them; they'll think I shot him!*

His breath came rapidly now. His whole body felt weak. But his keen mind kept on working. Ah! He knew a way out. Relieved by the thought of safety the way carried, he grew pleased with its simplicity and its richness.

Calmly he put Mrs. Kelsey's six bonds in the chest and carried chest and ledger into the vault. He struck a match and looked in the safe. Saw packages of currency, gold and silver coins, and two moneybags plump with money.

Without hesitation he took both bags. As he did so and moved to the vault door the irony of what he was doing struck him. *A thief robbing a thief; and a dead one at that. Oh, well,* he thought, *four thousand of it is mine, anyway. And the bank has my note. That's four thousand more.*

Ridiculous and warped! And he knew it. But it helped to stifle little twinges which came from his hardened conscience.

Now Wayne Musgoes' accounts would be plenty short. This would be reason for suicide. Reason for murder, too. But a real thieving murderer would have taken all. *Oh, to hell with it!* He shut and locked the vault.

Stepping quickly, but quietly, he went to the back door and unlocked it. Then walked to the office and shut his eyes as he placed the keys on the table before Wayne Musgoes' corpse.

IN THE office doorway he chanced a backward glance. The stain on Musgoes' vest had widened and a thin line of blood showed on his chin. *He's dead. Deader than a doornail,* Statler thought, *but I didn't kill him.* He shrugged his shoulders. *They can't hang this one on me.*

A bag of money tucked under each arm, he walked to the back door and listened.

Now the fact he found himself calm surprised him. That he knew no remorse did not occur to him.

That he felt elation was understandable —to him. For now, the first time in his life, he had a sufficiency of money.

And, after all, money and his passion for gambling, were the only things for which Cortland Statler gave a tinker's damn.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE clock in the hall had struck two when Daisy Swanson came home from the Episcopal church. She brought a friend to dinner, Miss Sarah Whitely, who was a dressmaker. Miss Whitely was twice Daisy's age. She lived alone in the back room of her small shop on Third Street. Her face had brightened with pleasure at Daisy's invitation given as they left the church after the meeting. Daisy was glad she had thought to invite her, for Miss Whitely had little upon which to live, except memories of her soldier lover who had been killed at First Bull Run.

Miss Whitely had managed to chatter while she enjoyed Suwannee's roast beef and mince pie; and Daisy had not thought of the note to her father which she had told Suwannee to take to MacLaren's. After dinner the two women decorously kept the Sabbath by conversing in low tones in the sitting room.

As the clock struck four Miss Whitely prepared to leave, reluctantly, Daisy saw.

In the hall Daisy said, "Wait, Sarah,

and I'll get you some mincemeat and a fruit cake."

She went to the kitchen and heard Suwannee crooning to herself upstairs. Opening the door leading to the back stairs she called in low tone: "Suwannee."

"Yassum, honey. Ise in mah room."

"What are you doing?"

"Ise readin' mah Bible to mahsef an' talkin' to da Lawd."

"Did you take my letter to MacLaren's for the camp team?"

"No'me. Ise gwine down dis noon, an' ah meet dat nice, pahlite Mistah Statlah, an' he say he gwine take it fo me."

Daisy clutched her skirts and ran hurriedly up the stairs to Suwannee's doorway.

"Mr. Statler! Where did you see him?"

"On ouah fron' walk. He done come to call on yo. But yoall gwine to church an' meetin', Ise tole him." Now Suwannee's black face fell as she watched her mistress. "So he say hes gwine take it foah me. He mos' jerk it out fum mah hand. Cause mah roas' was askin' foah to be basted in mah oven."

"Oh-h," Daisy said and turned to go down the stairs.

"Wasn't that nice and con-siderable of him, honey?" Suwannee asked, rolling *considerable* around her tongue.

"I—guess so," Daisy answered.

She gave Sarah Whitely a jar of mincemeat and a fruit cake. Listened to Sarah's thanks and goodbye talk at the front door. But her mind was not on Sarah Whitely's words. *Cortland Statler! Why had he come calling on Sunday noon?* And why hadn't he come back?

When talkative Miss Whitely had gone Daisy went to the kitchen. At the foot of the stairs she called: "Suwannee, did Mr. Statler come back later?"

"No'me, honey. Now what's frettin' yo. Ah done tole him you would be late. But ah nevah had wits to tell him come back for a nothah call dis hyah Sunday."

Daisy walked slowly to the sitting room and sat down in a rocker near the bay windows. Her thoughts were troubled as she watched darkness come. She saw lamps lighted in houses across the street; and she got up and lighted the lamps on the mantel; then returned to her chair. Now she rocked slowly as she thought of quesitons Hub had asked her about the first two holdups.

Hub, she knew, suspected Cortland Statler. The smooth lawyer had had opportunity to learn payroll messengers were coming through Sioux City bound for her father's camps. Hub had said he had proof Wayne Musgoes was in this holdup. If it were true Musgoes was involved; then, Daisy found herself admitting, it could also be true Cortland Statler was guilty.

She did not wholly believe it. Rather she did not wish to believe it. Cortland Statler had accepted hers and her father's hospitality and friendship. He was her father's trusted lawyer. Mercy! she exclaimed mentally, ***he has even asked me to marry him.***

YET something lurked in those green eyes, behind that handsome, mask-like face which she had never liked.

No gentleman, no man of honor, would open another's letter. And Cortland Statlet was a gentleman. Or was he? He had honor. Or did he? She wondered; and she found she was not certain. And now her woman's instinct warned her.

She had suspected Cortland Statler might have had some monetary or lawyer interest in the first two holdups. She remembered she had informed Hub of how Statler could have obtained information for the bandits. But her mind had lately been occupied with the everyday affairs of her normal, busy life. She had not given much thought to Cortland Statler. The news from Hub that he knew Wayne Musgoes was in the last robbery and shooting had been astounding. But—she colored as she admitted to herself—her thoughts had turned oftener to Hub than to his news.

Now she wondered why Cortland Statler had come calling this noon. To get an answer to his proposal of marriage? If so, why had he not returned in the afternoon? Could it be something about the note Suwannee let him take?

She wondered why Cortland Statler had proposed marriage last Thursday evening in such a hurry. Had wanted to be married at once. Though there had seemed to be an unspoken understanding between them, there had never been any love making or ardent courting.

Finally she had her answers. It is

Father's money he is after! Stories she had heard of him were true. He was a fiend for gambling. A wastrel! A rake! He needed money for gambling. He must be in financial difficulties because of it. She had heard her father say gambling ruined more men than whiskey.

Those eyes! They did not hypnotize her. They repelled her. Now she knew she had realized something was behind them which was repulsive to her and she had not been aware of its real effect.

She had it! Cortland Statler was without honor among men.

Open her letter to her father? Of course he would. He would have despoiled her father's daughter, or tried to—if he had not desired her father's money more.

Anger engulfed her. She shook with it. Clenching her little fists and biting her lip she ran upstairs to her room. Put on her fur hat and sealskin coat. Took her muff and black gloves. Without looking in her mirror, she gathered her skirts and ran downstairs and out to the walk, and hurried south on Fourth Street.

MacLAREN'S general store, midway between Marcus Swanson's residence and Carsten's hardware store corner, had always been an interesting place to Daisy. For as long as she could remember John MacLaren had occupied a place in her heart. Even today, when she was required to be grownup and a lady, she called him Uncle Mac. As a small child, scarcely able to see over the big store's tables and counters, she had loved to visit with him.

A bell jingled and tinkled musically as Daisy opened MacLaren's front door. Two large reflector lamps which hung from the ceiling lighted a square area stocked with goods of all sorts. Daisy strolled between counters and tables and sniffed pleasing odors of dress goods, denims, canvas, and woolens in the cloth section. The different smells, rich and heavy, as she passed the leather goods and findings section. Now delicious odors. Prunes and dried apples. Coffee in big bags on the floor. Spices in glass jars. Cofish and salt mackerel in wooden casks.

She paused at the candy counter and sampled a peppermint while she sniffed of gaily colored hard candies in wooden pails. Then, surreptitiously, she poked a wooden dipper far down in the pickle barrel and got a pickle.

With the whole gerkin in her mouth she managed. "Um-m! Uncle Mac."

"Yes, I saw ye, bunny. I'm coming."

MacLaren came from his office then, wearing a black skull cap to hide his bald head. He had on his black Sunday suit, and his white beard ended at the V of his velvet vest. He was a solid man who had profitted by his Scotch thrift; and he smiled his pleasure at this visit from Daisy. He walked toward her slowly, erect, moving with the careful, measured steps of men past seventy-five who have property and no debts.

"How've ye been, honey bun? And how's your pa?"

Daisy wished to be polite. She must answer his questions and not appear to be in a hurry. No customers were in the store to see her. So, she indulged a childhood habit she could never outgrow in spirit. She helped herself to crackers from MacLaren's cracker barrel; then boosted herself upon the grocery counter near the cheese end. Raising a glass domelike cover which inclosed a huge round cheese until she heard a brick counterweight catch in a holder behind her, she sampled a loose piece of cheese. Then with a big knife she sliced off a generous piece and pulled the dome down.

"Umm-m. My! That's good cheese, Uncle Mac. Where did you get it?" A time-worn question, but Daisy knew the old man expected it. "What kind is it?"

"Yes, 'tis. York State. Your pa likes that cheese, too. I have to get twelve cents a pound for it, 'count the freight."

"I'll take a pound before I go," Daisy said. "And a boat of those pickles."

MacLAREN moved to the pickle barrel and dippered about a quart of pickles into a wooden container. He dropped one pickle back in the barrel; then walked to the counter.

"That was the pickle I ate, wasn't it?" Daisy asked.

MacLaren moved his lips as if chewing something—a habit left from younger days when he had chewed tobacco. "So 'twas," he answered, "and I'll charge Pa for the candy and cheese."

It was part of a game started in Daisy's childhood. They laughed about it and other small things while the old man cut and wrapped a pound or so of cheese.

Daisy asked, "Did anyone bring a letter to my father for the camp team this afternoon?"

"No letters. The team won't stop tonight, teamster said last night." As Daisy swung around, surprised. "Your pa is closing up. Teamster didn't get any supplies either trip yesterday. Your pa has been letting men go all week. One or two in last evening to cash company orders."

"But wasn't Mr. Statler here with a letter this noon?"

"Lawyer Statler? I never see him." MacLaren shook his head and handed two packages to Daisy.

"What time did you open up, Uncle Mac?" Daisy asked and put the packages in her muff.

"Soon's I got back from early church. Nobody has been in with anything for your pa all afternoon."

"Look in the box, will you, Uncle Mac?"

She slipped down from the counter. Together they went to the office partition and peered into the cigar box tacked there for the convenience of camp teamsters.

"See? Nothing there," MacLaren said.

Now Daisy could hardly wait; and she had a hard time to keep her anger from showing as she walked to the door with the old man and said goodbye to him.

She hurried to Statler's office stairway knowing it was improper for a lady to visit any man's office and living quarters at night. Or alone, especially on Sundays. But in her mood she did not care who saw her now.

She hitched her skirts and scampered up the long stairs and knocked boldly on the waiting room door. She knocked again and got no response. The hall was dark, but she scurried to the library door; and this time she rattled the doorknob. No sound came from within. She turned away; and her little heels made quick clicking noises as she went down the stairs.

She saw Statler's horses and Ebernau's sleigh at Carsten's rail; and concluded Cortland Statler was not far away. As long as her rage held she had to see him. She went to the crosswalk and crossed to the Musgoes bank corner; then walked slowly past the dimly lighted bank to a point on Fourth Street opposite Naper's drugstore next to Carsten's. Here she looked up at Statler's windows and saw no light showing at any.

Exasperated, angry, she walked on to the north corner of the block and turned around to retrace her steps. And then she saw Cortland Statler ahead of her as he walked under the street lamp and crossed Fourth Street at the bank corner.

Daisy expected Statler to go to his office stairway. Instead he disappeared as he continued on past Carsten's toward Third Street. A bit uncertain she stopped across from Naper's, thinking he would return and go to his office.

PRESENTLY she glanced up at his side windows. A light showed at the rear one. As she stared, scarcely believing her eyes, she saw a light show at the library windows.

Bewildered, for she knew there was no way to Statler's office except the front stairs, she crossed the street and ran up the wooden steps in the dark way to the hall. Listening now, slightly frightened, but still angry, she stole to the library door.

She knocked; got no response; knocked again. Then heard movement inside. A key turned in the lock.

"Who is it? Frank?"

"It's I. Daisy Swanson; and I wish to see you, Cort."

The door opened. Cortland Statler faced her, in his shirtsleeves, but his usual calm self.

"Well, Daisy! This is a surprise. Come in. What are you—? Is anything the trouble?"

She went in past him, high color in her cheeks; and turned at the stove and watched him lock the door. Now she stepped to the long green-topped table. An open carpetbag was on the far end and she saw shirts and articles of clothing on a chair near the carpetbag. On the table near her she saw the end of a leather valise. Statler's fur-lined overcoat was over the valise. His suit coat and black hat were on top of the overcoat.

He came over and stood beside her; took his suit coat and put it on, adjusting it carefully.

Now she showed her emotion as she turned and faced him, her gray eyes wide, her mouth partly open, the lapels of her sealskin coat rising and falling with her rapid breathing.

"Daisy, what is it? What can I do for you?"

"You can tell me first how you got up here."

"I have been here all afternoon, my dear lady."

"I was here five minutes ago and no one was here."

"I was taking a nap."

"Cortland Statler, I just saw you cross the street from Musgoes' bank."

He was caught; and he knew it. "You must be mistaken, Daisy." A faint flush came to his cheeks; and he turned away from her.

FOR an instant Daisy thought she might be mistaken and was sorry for her words. But no—she was positive she had seen him. In his fur-lined coat, his arms not swinging, but gathered to his waist as though he carried something.

"There's no back stairway, is there?" she asked.

"No; and there's no reason why I should lie about it."

"I'd like the letter to my father Suwannee gave you this noon to take to MacLaren's."

"Letter! Oh! I'm sorry, Daisy. Suwannee did give me an envelope this noon—"

"Yes."

"To take to MacLaren's—" He paused thinking, sparring for time, hoping she would offer help. "I forgot it, Daisy, just a minute, and I'll get it." He went in his private office.

Daisy leaned against the table and let its edge press into her thigh until she noticed her thigh hurt. Her knees were weak. Her anger had nearly gained charge of her. She was determined that it would not; and she pressed hard against the table for a counter irritant. Now she swung impatiently away from the table. As she did so her voluminous skirts brushed the tail of Statler's overcoat; and the coat fell to the floor.

She picked it up; and, as she straightened to replace it she gasped. For on the table before her and in the open valise she saw gold and silver coins, rolls of paper-wrapped coins, green and orange currency—thick packs of it.

Hurriedly, just in time, she put Statler's overcoat over the valise and the money; and she sat down as Statler came in.

"Here you are, my dear. And apologies of your humble servant go with the return of it. I'm truly sorry."

Daisy took off her right glove. Looked at the back of the envelope while he watched her. She felt fresh glue; and knew he knew she did.

"I'm sorry, too, Cort," she said in low tones. "Not so much this wasn't at MacLaren's. But because—Well." She stood up—still angry, still defiant.

He looked at his watch. "It's hardly seven. We could run up with it now."

"The team won't be in tonight, Mr. MarLaren said."

"Then why did you come here, Daisy?" he asked, seizing upon the point.

She did not answer; but her eyes held him.

He saw she made a pretty picture in her gray velvet dress, black sealskin coat, and brown mink hat. Her cheeks were flushed with what he thought was excitement. Her little mouth, partly open, framed white teeth; and her full red lips made a small cupid's bow. He caught her air of breeding and dignity; and he saw she was not frightened. A faint odor of clean clothes and the scent of bath powder and lavender came from her. She was alive and vital—a healthy, normal woman, just crossing the threshhold into her full womenhood. Desirable to any man, even without her money.

And Statler had plenty of money now. In a few hours he would be miles out of this accursed town. Skimming over dark roads behind two fast horses on the way to Council Bluffs and St. Louis or Chicago. Tomorrow night he would be lost in the crowds and night life of a throbbing, blustering, wicked city. Then the limitless freedom of the far Southwest or West, where a man was his own law.

WHY not take her along? For awhile at least. Once he broke her she'd have to do his bidding—until he tired of her. He did not need her father's money now, but she would be fun to play with.

"What are you thinking, Cortland Statler?"

He started. "Nothing. Except I'm sorry you seem to have lost faith in me." He moved past her to the far end of the table and tossed a shirt into the open carpetbag. "I don't think you understand me, Daisy."

Fiddlesticks! she thought and said: "Are you going away on one of your trips?"

"I'm running down to the Bluffs. A matter there may keep me in and out for two weeks." He came back to her, watching her face, and saw what he thought was interest in him, but repressed. "I may run in to Chicago for a little vacation."

"Only two weeks, Cort?"

"Why, yes, about that. Why do you ask?" He must hurry, but longing came as he drew nearer to her and saw she did not move away. He felt her attractiveness. She was adorable. Worth risking a try. "Why don't you come along, Daisy? We could be married in the Bluffs first thing in the morning. Then, if you wish, go on to St. Louis or Chicago and New York."

She had put her muff and gloves on the table. Now she moved nearer his overcoat. Quickly she reached under it. "Your coat fell down while you were in your office." She saw him start. "We'd have plenty of money, wouldn't we?" With a jerk she tore open a roll of coins and let gold double eagles clink to the table.

"No, thanks, Cort," she said with a forced laugh. "I don't care for that sort of wedding. Nor that kind of honeymoon with your sort of man."

"What are you doing?"

"Looking at this money."

She seized a package of bills. Looked at the lefthand corner of one; then back at the edge of the double eagle in her hand.

"Well, stop it! That's money I drew out of the bank yesterday."

"Did you put this nick in this coin and Father's initials on this twenty dollar bill?"

"What?" He seized her wrist; bent to look at coin and bill in her hand as she held it out.

Then he saw Daisy's face close to his. Her mouth was closed in a perfect bow; her eyes sparkled in the lamplight. She smiled faintly. He heard her breathing; saw her breasts rise and fall in the V of her open coat. And these signs of anger he misunderstood in the heat of the passion that stewed within him.

BEFORE she, or he, knew what was coming he had his arms around her. Quickly he jerked her to him; bent her head back; and kissed her on the mouth.

She squirmed and pushed and beat his head with her fists; and, finally, gasping for breath he had crushed from her, she got both hands on his flushed face and shoved.

As he released her he said, "I love you, Daisy."

She had her breath. "Love me!" she shot between clenched teeth. "You, you—Take your hands from me. Or I'll have you shot before midnight."

As he drew back, panting, she snatched her glove from the table and slapped it viciously across his face. Then drew back her hand and slapped it full on his face.

Now she saw his anger and his wild passion; and she knew she would have a time of it. "Don't you dare touch me, Cortland Statler! I should be afraid of you, but I'm not." Her own rage increased; and she drew herself erect. "You should be shot."

"Oh, come, come, my fine lady. Why all these dramatics. I'm only a man, you know."

She found replies to that, but held her tongue. *You've got to do something!* her mind screamed. *That's Father's money. He will make it good. This fiend intends to run away with it.*

"Perhaps I was upset over the letter," she said. "I'll go now. Will you see me home?"

Reaching for her muff, she thought she heard steps on the stairs. Quickly she glanced at Statler. Then they both heard it—heavy, decisive steps getting increasingly louder as they mounted the stairs.

"Someone is coming," Daisy said. "You must get rid of whoever it is and take me home. Quickly! I can't be seen here."

For an instant she thought she saw him gloat over her predicament. Then he seized her arms; and she became fearful as she imagined his arms around her again.

"Leave me alone or I'll scream!"

"Quiet! Quiet!"

He made a motion to clap his hand over her mouth as they heard imperative steps sound from the stairs to the waiting room door.

"In here!" Statler ordered. "Quick!" He pushed Daisy toward his office door.

"It'll ruin you if anyone sees you here now."

He got her through the office to his bedroom door as a knock sounded at the waiting room door. He opened the bedroom door. As Daisy hesitated he pushed her in.

Loud knocks sounded now; then the thump of a heavy object being banged on the door.

Statler shut the bedroom door and walked into his library.

CHAPTER XXV

HUB had swung from his saddle at the sheriff's hitching rail tired from the long ride behind Poke Smith. Sweeney's horse had followed them and they tied the three animals at the rail and went in to Melvig's office. Murt Melvig was alone, lighting his lamps in the waiting room. Hub briefly told his story to Melvig; then waited until a deputy returned from his supper and left.

He rode Bill to the hotel stable and turned him over to the stableman. He went to his room and got Cortland Statler's Sharps rifle and two cartridges. Now he slipped a cartridge into the rifle's chamber as he turned into the alley back of Wayne Musgoes' bank.

This was unpleasant business. Unpleasant and depressing. He wished someone else was about it. But it had to be done. Half of $5,000 was a small fortune in these depression times. It would set Lonnie up in Denver until he got well.

Then, Hub thought. *I'll be free to get a good job.*

He walked boldly to the back door of the bank and knocked. No steps sounded within. He knocked again. And then he raised the rifle and banged the butt against the door with a crashing thud.

Still no one came to the door. Perhaps, he thought, Wayne Musgoes was at home, although Murt Melvig had said the banker always went to his bank on Sunday evenings. And Hub had seen a light at the bank windows.

He edged around a rain barrel near the door over crunching ice and snow to the first of the shaded windows. On the drawn shade he saw the shadow of a chair. Above the chair back the head and one shoulder of a man—all crossed by iron bars at the window.

Back at the door he rattled the doorknob. To his surprise the door opened.

He walked in and down the dark and narrow hall, his finger on the Sharps' trigger and thumb on the hammer.

Someone, he was positive, was in the back room. Good sense required he be cautious. As he reached the counting room he swung the Sharps up in position to jerk it to his shoulder and shoot.

"Come out, Musgoes!" And the sound of his voice in the silent room startled him. "Come out with your hands up."

He got no response and thought the man in the office might be asleep. Or he might be playing possum, ready to shoot.

Hub swung away to his left and quickly squared himself before the office doorway —alert to shoot, and shoot first.

But now he saw Musgoes at his table, hunched down as if napping.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Musgoes—" He stopped and advanced into the room. For the thought had come: *This man is dead.*

He put the rifle on the table and walked around the table, looking down at Musgoes. He saw the gun in Musgoes' lap; and he saw, too, a blood stain on Musgoes' vest. *Shot! Suicide!* He felt of the stain and found it damp. Blood must still be coming from the wound. And this meant Musgoes had killed himself but a few minutes ago.

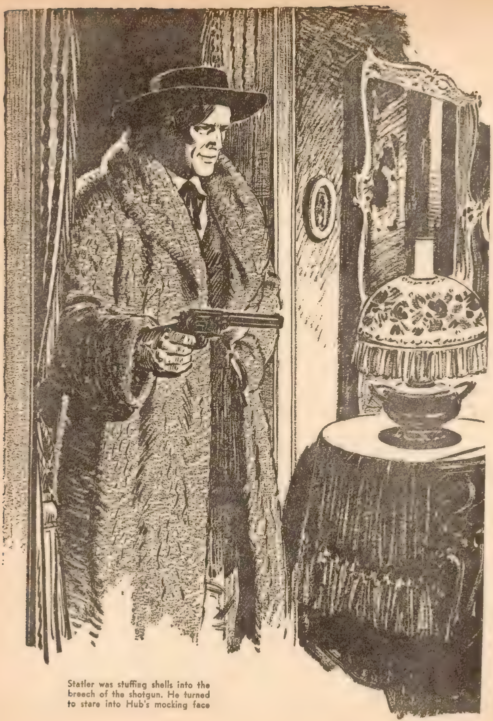
As he moved around Musgoes he saw the partly open drawer of the table; and his quick eyes caught a sheet of notepaper with incomplete writing on it. It might be, he thought, a suicide note, and pulled the paper from the drawer.

He saw the letter was dated today—Sunday, February eighteenth; and read:

I expect to be at the Planters' Hotel
in St. Louis this coming weekend—

This could be no suicide if the half-written sentence was in Wayne Musgoes' handwriting. For obviously, Musgoes expected to be alive the coming weekend and in the city of St. Louis.

HE WAS writing this when someone came to the back door. Musgoes, he thought, had let the visitor in. Whoever the visitor was, Musgoes had not feared him. And the visitor had shot Musgoes. As Hub saw the ring of keys on the table—*shot him; unlocked the back door; brought the keys back; and skipped.*



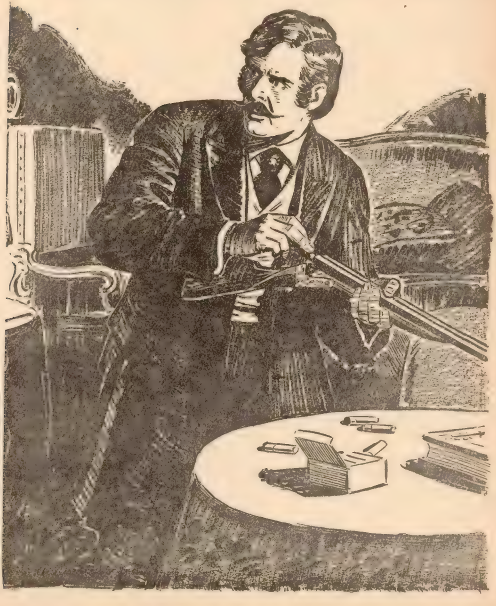
Statler was stuffing shells into the breech of the shotgun. He turned to stare into Hub's mocking face

Hub put the unfinished letter in the drawer and walked around Musgoes' chair to the table end. Now he took the Sharps; went to the back door; made note there was no key in the lock; and left.

He waited at the alley entrance until satisfied no one was near the street; then walked quickly to the bank corner and crossed to Carsten's.

Statler's horses harnessed to a sleigh and tied to the rail held his attention briefly. The horses and sleigh might mean Cortland Statler had a client in his office or a caller.

But it cut no odds. He did not intend to wait on Statler. He intended to finish



this business tonight.

He went up the lawyer's stairs and to the waiting room door and knocked. And again. Then banged the butt of Statler's rifle on the door.

"A minute! I'll be there."

Quick footsteps; and Hub dropped the Sharps to his hip, leveled the barrel at the door, and thumbed the hammer back to full cock.

Cortland Statler unlocked the door and opened it a few inches. "I'm very busy—" he started.

Hub put his foot against the door and shoved it wide open. "I brought your Sharps rifle back, friend. We'll go back there where it's light."

He had seen Statler start. Now he saw him turn gracefully and precede him into the library.

At the table Statler turned and faced Hub in the Library doorway. "Good evening, Lieutenant. Was your—I, I must confess I had forgotten about you. Was your—hunt for bandits successful?"

"Yes—quite," Hub answered laconically. "Only I haven't got 'em all yet. Three are dead. One's in jail. And I'm after the fifth."

"Oh! How interesting. And who are they?"

"I guess you know."

Hub had seen Statler's overcoat and hat on a chair at the table. He pointed the rifle at them now. "If you'll put on your coat and hat we'll walk over to Murt Melvig's."

Statler, apparently cool and calm, loosened his shirt collar with a finger. He moved to an empty chair and sat down.

"Why, now," Statler said, "Lieutenant Miller, I don't know as I care to do that. I've—someone in my back room right now. Sit down, won't you? Then we'll talk about going to Murt's."

HUB moved in and jerked a chair away from the table and sat down. "All right, friend, have it any way you wish." He rested the barrel of the Sharps on the table and swung the muzzle flat on Statler. "I'll wait, but eventually you are going out of here, if I have to carry you out —dead."

Statler laughed.

"I said dead."

Statler's green eyes narrowed. In all his hectic life he had never been so close to real panic as he was now. This big, brown-faced fellow in the buffalo coat, his finger on the trigger of the cocked, big-bore rifle which was leveled at Statler, meant business. What does he know? Statler wondered. Just what will he do?

He thought quickly. If he could get into his bedroom . . . Daisy Swanson was in it. . . It would certainly be compromising for her to have this Miller see her. Could he make use of it? With Swanson, yes. But not with this damn Miller.

The only way to handle Miller was to kill him; and that was what Statler knew he would have to do. But how? Now he cursed himself for not having put on his gun belt. It and his six-shooter were in his bedroom, hanging by the whatnot in the corner. God! If he could only get it. Then to kill this cuss. Tie Daisy's hands, gag her; and away in his sleigh for St. Louis and the western mountains.

Ah! He had it. He could get into his bedroom and come out with Daisy before him as a shield and shoot Miller.

"Well," Hub said as he saw Statler's pale face brighten. "I'm willing to give you ten minutes to see your someone in your back room. Leave the door open and get through with whoever it is. I'm tired and sleepy."

Statler had his thumbs hooked in the armholes of his waistcoat. Now he stood up and transferred his right hand to his trousers pocket. This showed his waist and Hub saw he wore no gun.

Hub ejected the Sharps' load and caught the cartridge. "Here's your rifle, Statler. Thanks. We'll leave it here on the table."

Now, Statler thought, *this will be easy.* "Excuse me, Lieutenant," he said and went to his office door, opened it, and left the door partly open.

He sat down at his desk and rustled papers while he did some of the hardest thinking of his life. A few minutes and he heard Hub shift in his chair. Statler got up, moved stealthfully over his office rug and quietly opened the bedroom door. Looking back to see if Hub was following he stepped quickly into the large bedroom and swung to his right toward his gun belt which hung on the wall beside the whatnot in the corner.

Horrified, he stared at belt and holster. The six-shooter was gone.

He glanced around the room. Daisy was gone, too. Statler saw the lamp on the table near the side window flicker and noticed the window was wide open.

He swung back to the corner by the whatnot and got his shotgun. This would do. With it he could blow a hole in Miller and get out of there.

He took two brass shells from the whatnot and pressed the lever at the side of the breech of the big ten guage shotgun so it would open and he could insert the shells.

"Hold it!" Hub commanded from the office doorway. "Put the gun back or I'll have to drop you."

STATLER swung around and let the stock of the shotgun drop to the floor as he saw Hub's Colt come up level with his waist.

"Put it in the corner. Put on your hat and coat. We're going. I thought you were lying about someone being here."

Statler saw one more chance. On the excuse he needed to put out the lamp on the table he could jump through the window. Miller would follow him over Naper's roof. He could ambush Miller on the attic stairway when he followed and bat him over the head with anything he could get his hands on. Then return, get his hat and coat and the money—

"I'll put out the lamp and shut the window, Lieutenant," Statler said.

"No, I guess not. You'll walk into your library ahead of me. I'll come back later and close your office for you."

As Statler hesitated Hub moved in and got behind him. "Walk on, friend. Get in there and put on your coat and hat."

As they walked into the library they heard footsteps on the stairs.

"Stand there by the stove," Hub said, "until they get up here and I see who it is."

Daisy had been shocked when she found herself in Cortland Statler's bedroom. Her anger had not cooled, though she had grown frightened. Suppose Cortland Statler came in after his caller left and prevented her from leaving.

He had her father's money and his horses were at Carsten's rail. He was planning to go away. Flee! And take her father's payroll with him. No telling what the fiend was planning. He might even try to force her to go with him; and she would rather be dead than alone with the Cortland Statler she knew now.

Glancing around she saw a double-barreled shot-gun in the corner by the whatnot and a six-shooter in the holster of a gun belt on the wall. Swanson had taught her how to handle small firearms. She owned and had fired a light pistol. Without second thought she drew the six-shooter from its holster and saw it was fully loaded. If Cortland Statler came in this bedroom and shut the door she would shoot him.

She thought of going out the hall door and dashing to the street. But if she did Statler and his caller would hear her. Statler might stop her. If he did the caller would see her.

How had Statler come up here—into this bedroom? She darted to a back window; then darted to one at the side near the lamp. Pressing her face against the window pane and shading her eyes she saw the flat, tarred roof of Naper's drug store.

Now she knew how Statler had gained his bedroom without coming up the stairs. A wide plank rested on the window sill and ran across the top of the drugstore's close wall to its roof.

Daisy raised the window gently. Steadying herself with her left hand on the window casing she got upon the sill, bent down, and stood on the plank. With her skirts gathered in her left hand and the six-shooter in her right she crossed to the roof and ran to the back end of the building. She knew the Naper family lived in the rear of the building and had seen Mrs. Naper hang wash on this roof. She searched frantically, found a trapdoor, and opened it. Soon she was down a dark stairway and in the alley.

SHE ran around Carsten's and untied Cortland Statler's horses. Without pausing to pull their blankets from the horses, she jumped into the sleigh, and swung the eager pair into the street.

A colored boy leaned against a bobsled tied to the rail near Poke Smith's horse in front of the sheriff's office as Daisy pulled up.

"Here boy!" Daisy called. "I'm Miss Swanson. Hold these horses and tomorrow come to my house on Fourth Street and

I'll give you a dollar."

She dashed up the steps, down the hall and through the sheriff's waiting room; and burst into his private office.

Disregarding men in the smoke-filled room she rushed to Melvig's desk. "Quick, Mr. Melvig! He's got all my father's payroll in his law office. It's marked and I saw it. He's a crook and he's—"

"Here! Here! Daisy! What in—? Put down that gun!"

She turned. "Oh!" And she was in her father's arms, her nose against his broad, woolly chest. She smelled tobacco, whiskey, horses, and the woods. But all made the grandest odor Daisy had ever smelled.

Melvig stood up at his desk and leisurely put on his gun belt. "Cortland Statler," he said and blew out his breath in a long sigh. Now he gave orders to two deputies who sat at a table with Poke Smith. "Well, Burr, lock Poke up. I'll go get Statler; Miller must have tackled Musgoes first." He motioned to the other deputy. "You come along and take Daisy home."

"Quick!" Daisy urged. "Or he'll get away. I've his horses, but he'll steal somebody's cutter."

Melvig laughed; then deliberately lighted his pipe. "All right, Daisy. We'll go get the cuss before he does."

Daisy sat in the back seat of Statler's rented sleigh, her father beside her, and hurriedly told of the letter, her visit at MacLaren's, and the scene at Statler's office.

As Melvig turned the horses in at Carsten's rail Swanson jumped out. "Now you go home, Daisy, and wait there. I'll be right up. Soon as this is over and I find Hub Miller. Take her home, Jim."

Melvig joined him on the boardwalk. The two went up the stairs together. They walked through the waiting room and into the library—Swanson first, his hands in his sheepskin jacket pocket.

Swanson swung around the stove and squared himself before Hub and Statler and saw Hub grin.

"Got 'em, eh?" Swanson said, looking at Hub. "I thought you would. This fellow—" jerking his head toward Statler —"I've been wondering about you for quite awhile, Statler."

"You're under arrest, Cort," Melvig said in his slow way.

"What for?"

"What do you think?" Swanson barked. "Highway robbery! Murder! God knows what else."

"Humpf!" Statler snorted, and drew himself erect. "Have you a warrant for my arrest?" He saw Melvig look at Swanson; and the look gave him courage. "You arrest me without a warrant and Frank Wilkes will have me free on a writ of habeas corpus before noon tomorrow—"

"OH, HELL!" Swanson cut in and went to the table. "Where's that payroll?" He looked under the table. Went in Statler's office. Came out with Statler's carpetbag, his leather valise, and Daisy's muff. He pulled an envelope from the muff and tore the envelope open and looked at the folded paper it held.

"Phoof!" he exclaimed. "There's no writing on it. Statler, what did you do with my daughter's letter?" He crammed envelope and paper in a pocket of his coat and opened the valise. "Where'd you get this money? Speak up! Quick, man!"

"I refuse to answer on the ground it might incriminate me," Statler said and smiled as he assumed his lawyer role. "I have that constitutional privilege, you know." He moved away from the stove now and felt the power of his knowledge and ability. No jury would convict him. Not if he conducted his own defence. "The money is in my possession. I'll keep it, if you please, gentlemen. Should you lawfully arrest me it will come in handy for bail."

Hub felt admiration for him as he saw him face Swanson. "Well," Hub said and looked at Murt Melvig, "hold him here and I'll go and get a warrant."

"Arrest the cuss, Murt!" Swanson snapped. "I charge him with robbery on the highway. That's all you need. I'll stand back of you. Get him out of here before I lick him. Then go get Wayne Musgoes. I'll take this money home and put it in my safe."

"Come on, Cort," Melvig said. "I guess you got a real case on your hands now."

As Melvig and Cortland Statler walked through the waiting room door Swanson said to Hub: "Well, young fellow, put up your gun, and we'll turn out these lamps and go. I'm hungry."

Hub shut the window in the bedroom, turned down the lamp and blew it out.

Swanson took the valise and Daisy's muff; Hub blew out the library lamp; and they left.

"What did you do with Musgoes?" Swanson asked as they went down the stairs.

"He's dead, Mr. Swanson."

"Humpf! You shoot him?"

"No."

"Shot himself, eh?"

"I wouldn't know, sir."

As they reached the board walk Hub saw Daisy in the sleigh.

"I thought I told you to go home," Swanson said as he tossed the valise in the sleigh and got in the back seat. "Where's that officer?" he asked Daisy who had moved to the front seat.

"He left. The town watchman saw us. He said he tried the back door of Musgoes' bank. It was unlocked and something has happened to Wayne Musgoes."

"THAT ends that," Swanson barked. "Lieutenant, you drive around and tell my teamster to put my horses and sled in Ebernau's. Then we'll drive up to the house and have supper. I haven't had anything to eat since breakfast. Billy has been packing up. He'll bring the last load early in the morning."

As they went up Fourth Street Hub felt Daisy move closer to him. She looked up and he saw her eyes sparkle. "Mr. Melvig's deputy told me what you did, Hub. You are to be congratulated."

"We'll forget it, Daisy," he said. "I'm sorry things had to turn out the way they did."

At his residence Swanson said, "Come in the dining room, Hub; we'll have a drink of real whiskey while Daisy and Suwannee get supper. Then you tell me about everything. We'll balance accounts and I'll give you an order for $5000. But you'll have to go to the Bluffs to get the money."

"Half $5,000, Mr. Swanson. The other half goes to Mrs. Springer. I'll take it to her tomorrow."

They had eaten supper and the clock in the hall had struck ten. As Hub put on his coat he and Daisy heard Swanson in the kitchen say to Suwannee: "I'll bet your eyes pretty near popped out of your black face when you saw all that money they marked."

Daisy said, "He's eating more of that cheese I got at MacLaren's." As Hub moved to the door: "You'll come up to supper tomorrow night, Hub?"

"I'm sorry, Daisy, but I must go to Council Bluffs."

"Tuesday evening?" she suggested. "You aren't leaving here for good, are you?"

"I'll be back."

"Tuesday?"

"I've my brother to think of, you know —in Denver."

"Oh," she said, smiling. "Well— I won't say goodbye." She held out her hand; and he took it.

Swanson came from the kitchen then; and Hub released Daisy's hand.

"Here! Wait a minute," Swanson barked. "Where you going, boy? You're staying here tonight. Take those horses down to Ebernau's and come back."

"It won't do, Father," Daisy said, a note of wistfulness in her voice. "He's moving. I can see it in his eyes."

She tuned away to the stair rail and put her hand on the newel post.

Hub and Swanson talked for a few minutes. As Hub opened the door he saw Daisy turn to the stairs. "Goodbye, Daisy."

"Goodbye, Hub," she said in a low tone. "Perhaps—I'm hoping I'll see you again—soon."

HUB awoke late Monday morning. A warm sun shone through the windows of his room. He got up to shut the window and heard the talk of people in the street before the hotel.

To his right he saw a crowd before Musgoes' bank. He thought of Jack Springer's words before he was shot Friday evening: "I can't get it out of my head that Musgoes delayed us on purpose."

Now Jack Springer was dead. Musgoes was dead—killed by his own hands or murdered; and his bank was being besieged by angry depositors. Cortland Statler was in jail. Jipp Grinsted and the hatchet-faced Sweeney were frozen stiff twenty miles northwest of Sioux City; and Poke Smith, who shot them, was in jail but due to get off with a light sentence.

His job was done. He would leave at noon for Council Bluffs and get his reward; then—

"Oh, she stands right there
"In the moonlight bare."

Hub swung around to the door at sound of a shrill voice in the hall. "Billy!" he cried as he opened the door and the camp cook walked in. "Are you drunk?"

"Un-ugh. Jest a few drinks 'count of beeg surprise."

"Come in! Sit down! What big surprise?"

"I hear all about how you catch holdup gang. 'Bout that licking you gave Jipp Grinsted, too. Ol' man tickled as all get out, I bet, if he know. Sheriff got all Jipp Grinsted's money, I heard. I got beeg surprise for you. Clara Hobbs sell her lunchroom for much money."

"How do you know?"

"Lonnie write me letter. Jest for me. See?" Billy sat down in the rocker, embarrassed, and took a drink from a pint bottle. "He's going to school, too, like Tim. Get all well soon."

"Put that bottle away," Hub said, "and I'll shave and dress. Then you and I will have breakfast."

He went to the bathroom and shaved. When he came back he found Billy sitting on the bed. The little man looked so crestfallen Hub asked: "What's the matter, Billy? You look as if you'd lost your best friend."

"I got nothin'. Nothin' 'cept my pay an' my mudder in Canadey. Jest work all the time. An' now you'll go. What'll I do? Get drunk, I spose. Say, by cripes, I got a beeg surprise I brought in for you. Come downstairs."

"Wait until I pack my things. I'm giving up this room today. Going to Council Bluffs this noon—"

"Council Bluffs! Yeah! You're going to Colorado Territory." Billy took a drink which emptied the bottle; and put the bottle on the dresser. "Yipe! Can I go 'long to Denver with you, Hub?"

HUB stared at him. "What's on your mind? What's this big surprise you brought me. A letter?"

"Say, by gar, I forget that." Billy pulled a letter from his pocket and handed it to Hub. "From Clara Hobbs. Came day after you left."

As they went down the stairs Hub opened the letter. He paused at the foot of the stairs and read:

Dear Hub: I'm so homesick for you I'm leaving to see you tomorrow night. . . .

He dropped the letter as he heard a low voice say: "Hub!"

Clara Hobbs rose from a chair in the lobby and came toward him.

"She walk pretty near all the way to camp last night," Billy said.

"Clara! How did you get here?" She was close to him now and he seized her hands. "Why, now, girl, stop your crying. And you, Billy, stop dancing around. I want to talk to Clara."

THE END

★ BUFFALO TEAM ★

Buffalo aren't oxen—nor mules—as a lot of cowboy-experimenters thought!

THERE were once some cowboys who, with true Western enterprise, attempted to break a team of buffalo to harness. The animals submitted docilely enough to the harness and to being yoked together. The cowboys envisioned a great future for the buffalo as beasts of burden in the West, if their great strength and hardihood could be put to the uses of man.

A difficulty presented itself when the buffalo could not be made to respond to directions. Even the traditional stubbornness of the mule was nothing compared to the bullheadedness of the buffalo. Once they got started, the shaggy beasts liked to keep going, and no ordinary method would turn the team.

Determined not to be stopped by mere obstinacy, the cowboys evolved an ingenious scheme. The buffalo team was hitched to a wagon which was equipped to turn the team. By the driver's seat near the front of the wagon was a windlass with a crank. A rope was stretched from the windlass to the heads of the animals. When the driver wished to make a turn, he hastily began to wind the windlass on the side toward which he wished to go. The heads of the buffaloes were pulled in that direction and held there, until eventually they made the turn in spite of their opposition.

The cowboys succeeded in driving buffalo in harness with some hope of arriving at their intended destination. This method, however, proved to be a little too complicated and difficult for any great exploitation.

by June Lurie

CATTLE-COUNTRY QUIZ

By JAMES A. HINES

Test your cow-country savvy with these teasers!

Westerners and amigos, here's a chance to pit your wits in a quiz of the cattle country, against an old-timer who knows the thrilling saga of the cattle country. Mucha suerte, amigos!

1. Here are three famous cattle brands, can you name 'em?

1.

2.

3.

2. What year was it, that the Texas longhorns began moving northward in large numbers?

3. What is the cattleman's most cherished possession?

4. What does the cow-term "held", mean?

5. A sheepherder's job is one of the most harrowing jobs in the world. It is one of the world's oldest professions. It is a year-around, 24-hour a day job. In the spring and summer there is the menace of noxious weeds. Can you name four of them that are death to sheep?

6. Who was the first person to homestead in the United States, under the Homestead Act of 1862?

7. One old-time cowman said to another: "I started my herd with nothin' but a brandin' iron." What did the old-timer mean?

8. Where was the first telegraph station located in Arizona?

9. What does a cowpuncher mean when he says he "heeled the calves"?

10. True or False? In the range country there are many unwritten laws of conduct. For instance no person of the West will eat in a sheep camp or cow wagon without washing his own dishes afterwards; nor will he ride through a gate and leave it open so that valuable stock can stray.

11. What is a "road brand" in cow-country language?

12. What does the cowboy term "riding point", mean?

13. What noted gun-fighter was so well educated and spoke such good English that he was often regarded as a "sissy" on the frontier, to persons not knowing who he was?

14. What is a kack?

15. What become of John Chisum's ranch, one of the largest cattle spreads the West ever knew?

16. Can you name two old-time cattle trails, where they started and where they ended?

17. Name three Western states that lead in the production of gold?

18. Can you name three old-time cow-towns in the West?

19. The most important possession of the cowboy, his partner in every detail of work, is what?

20. What does the Spanish term *"jaquima"*, mean?

(Answers on page 145)

SURPRISE ATTACK

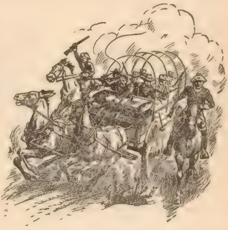
IT WAS November, 1874, in the country of the Cheyenne Indians. The Army was trying to round up the hostile redskins, and encountering considerable difficulty.

Lieutenant Frank D. Baldwin, of the Fifth Infantry, had with him, besides the infantry, a detachment of cavalry and a good number of wagons. He was scouring the locality with drive and dash as was his custom, when his scouts reported a large camp of Indians just ahead, over a hill.

His force was greatly outnumbered by the redskins. He could not get away or wait for reinforcements without having the Indians discover them and pounce upon the soldiers, with disastrous results probable. A surprise attack was the only recourse, yet his numbers were too small to be divided, and the infantry could not keep up with the cavalry in a charge.

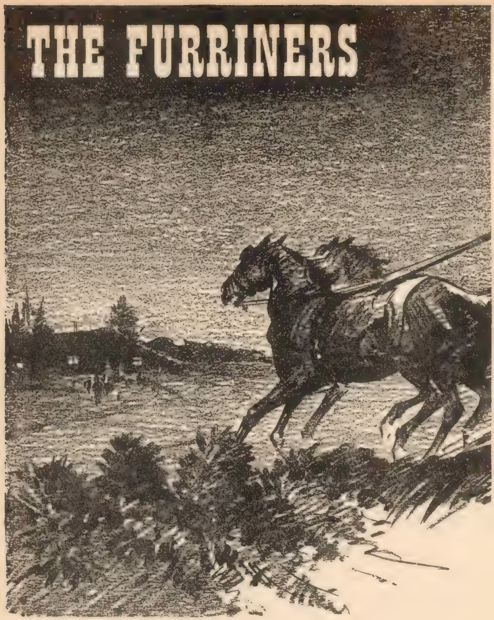
Baldwin thought fast, and came up with the solution. The wagons were placed in a single line, and the infantrymen climbed in, guns ready for action. The cavalry lined up on either side of the wagons.

The bugle sounded, the command came to charge. The teamsters whipped the mules into a gallop, and over the hilltop went the line of wagons, with the cavalry racing along beside them. The fiery charge rolled straight down the hill toward the Indian camp, men yelling, guns blazing, wagons bouncing. Under the weird sight the Indians broke completely. Lt. Baldwin had saved the day by his ingenuity!

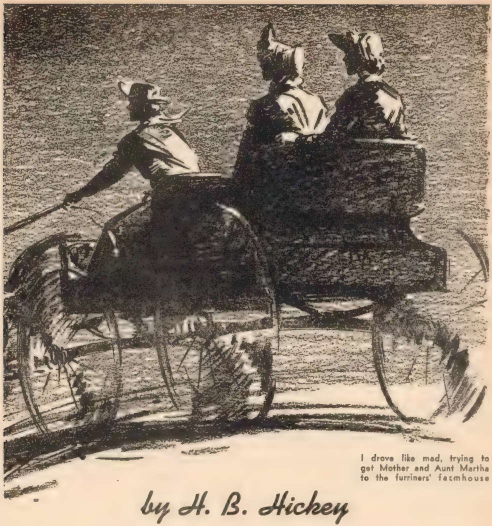


by Pete Boggs

THE FURRINERS



It was a funny country to the furriners—Only Aunt Martha an' me, wanted to give them a chance. She liked Sandor and I liked Illona . . .



I drove like mad, trying to get Mother and Aunt Martha to the furriners' farmhouse

by H. B. Hickey

"MAYBE you'll be able to tell them apart," Mr. Granger said. "I certainly can't. They all look alike to me; and one's as bad as the next, from what I seen of them."

He had just come into the house, and what with getting off his horse and climbing up the three steps he was pretty well winded. He stood wiping sweat off his forehead and his face was a shade redder than usual.

We had all been waiting for Mort to come. What I mean is, my father and the other men were waiting. I wasn't supposed to be there at all. In those days a boy of twelve wasn't supposed to mix in men's doings. But I made myself as small as I could and stayed somewhere behind my father.

"You mean they've come already?" my father asked. He pointed out an empty chair and Mr. Granger eased his heavy body into it.

"Not quite," he said. "The train was ahead of schedule but something went wrong with the engine and they're stuck a couple of miles out. Take them another hour to get it fixed. I came down from Bentonville along the tracks, was how I happened to see them."

The other men sat up a little straighter in their chairs. Mr. Jimson. who had a quarter section south of us, was there. So were Tom and Bob Enders. They lived beyond Mr. Jimson, and raised nothing but oats and horses. Ed Foster, who was sweet on my Aunt Martha, was sitting on the trunk in the corner. Ed was a big, dark handsome fellow and he knew it. I would have liked Ed better if he hadn't always smelled of whisky. He was a rider for Mr. Bellew who was a quiet little man but owned a lot of land and stock. Mr. Bellew was also there.

"What kind of furriners are they, anyway?" Tom Enders asked Mr. Granger. He went to the open window and spit out tobacco juice while Mr. Granger caught his breath.

"Mangy looking bunch. Wild as they come. Look like they'd cut your throat soon as not." Mr. Granger used his handkerchief again. "Women in scandalous clothes and the men got black mustaches a yard long. Eyetalians, I guess."

Everyone started talking at once except my father. He sat and stroked his own mustache, which was red. He was a big rawboned man with red hair, like mine, and he was respected because he minded his own business, which was farming, and was also good at it. The meeting was at our place because it was close to the railroad.

Since word had got out that a couple of sections had been sold to immigrants there had been a lot of undercover excitement. It had started two weeks before this meeting. My father had not paid much attention to it at first.

Nobody knew who started the talk. Ed Foster mentioned one evening that Mr. Granger and Mr. Bellew had been discussing something that afternoon. My father raised his bushy eyebrows the way he always did and shrugged. The next day Mr. Jimson stopped by and asked my father what he thought of letting the foreigners come in. My father said he hadn't been thinking about it.

I remember he also said that if the foreigners were willing to pay for the land and break their backs working it he didn't give a hoot. My father was having his own troubles that spring, what with a new baby in the house and it having been a bad winter for snow.

That was one of the few times I ever saw my father lose his temper. When Mr. Jimson mentioned how little moisture there'd been, my father swore. He bent and picked up a clod of dry earth and slammed it down again.

"They can give this blasted land back to the Indians for all I care!" he hollered. "I'm fed up to the gills!"

I KNEW he didn't mean what he said. It was good land, only a few miles from the Piute River. The only trouble was lack of water.

It didn't rain a great deal in that country, and the river ran through canyons below the level of the land so that irrigation was impossible. My father always said that if someone would ever get together enough money to irrigate, the crops would be so heavy the land couldn't hold them up. But that was a dream. It would take millions.

Mr. Jimson had rubbed his furrowed face. He was tall and thin and sick looking.

"It's all right to say that, Richards, but we've put in our money and our work, and I for one ain't aiming to let anyone hurt my interests. This land can't support too many, especially if they ain't the right kind."

"How do you know these people are not right?"

"I don't. But there's been talk. I don't want to chance it."

"There's always talk," my father said. "Less jaw and more elbow grease and maybe we'd do better."

"Well, I don't know. I was over to see the Enders boys the other day and they were talking to Mort Granger and they didn't like the idea of letting these foreigners get in."

My father was leaning against the plow handle. He scratched his finger along the wood and looked up at Mr. Jimson doubtfully.

"Seems to me you've been doing a lot of visiting lately," he said in his quiet way. Mr. Jimson got sore and I laughed. My father said, "What's so funny, Bill?" I stopped laughing.

"You're the only one to take that attitude," Mr. Jimson said angrily. "Everyone else sees eye to eye. Better think it over."

My father had thought it over. He was a strong minded man but he couldn't buck all his neighbors. Besides, the baby cried with colic all one week and kept him awake nights; and it looked like it just never would rain. My father had his troubles.

We were in for a bad year, it looked like. Everybody felt it and talk got stronger against the newcomers. Neighbors drifted over and spoke earnestly to my father and he looked harried and finally he got to nodding his head. And now this was the day the foreigners were to arrive and there was this meeting.

"I do wish they were arriving a week later," Mr. Bellew said. "I'm bringing in my matched Morgans to sort of show in our little rodeo tomorrow, and I'd rather not have trouble."

You couldn't blame him. Those horses were worth a fortune. Every spring the young bucks in our district would get up a riding contest and Mr. Bellew always showed some pure-bred cattle and horses. Compared to the big shows it was a pretty measly affair but we had a lot of fun.

"I don't hold with violence myself," my father said. "But there probably aren't many of them. Once they see how things stand they shouldn't make much fuss."

"We'll let them know how things stand, all right," Mr. Granger huffed. "I don't see what this country is coming to. Here our own people are having a time getting by and they want to crowd in a bunch of foreigners. Suppose Jimson's new neighbors don't like the way he's run his sorghum onto their land."

My father looked a little worried. He'd done the same thing. Ordinarily it wouldn't have meant much, but in a bad year everything counted.

"Devil take them," he muttered. "If it ain't one trouble, it's another."

THEY all nodded their heads and I nodded mine too. Then someone tapped my shoulder and I turned and looked up. My mother and my aunt had come in without being noticed. My mother was holding the baby in her arms. She motioned with her head for me to go out but I wouldn't go. I didn't want to miss anything.

"You always used to say that if we had more people here we'd make faster progress," she reminded my father.

He looked confused and couldn't think what to say for a second. But all the men were watching him.

"Reckon a man's got a right to change his mind," he said at last. There was a gap in the conversation then. Mr. Granger's oily voice filled it.

"Now, Mrs. Richards. You know how new people are. They won't be able to make it pay for a long time and they'll be over here borrowing and asking for help."

"Charity begins at home," Mr. Jimson said. The Enders boys hooked their thumbs in their overall straps and said, "Yeah."

"So far nobody's asked us for any," my mother said. "And if they do—well, we're not starving yet."

My father got red in the face. I think he had his own doubts, but he'd managed to suppress them. Now my mother was bringing them up again.

"Elizabeth," he said.

My mother knew that tone. When he used it there was no use arguing. But Aunt Martha was different. She was my father's sister and lived with us. She was a tall girl and not pretty, but with a certain goodness and character in the strong lines of her face.

Aunt Martha had good reasons for not getting involved in any arguments. She was the school teacher, and whatever salary she received had to be voted her by Mr. Bellew and Mr. Granger, among other members of the township's board. But you could always trust Aunt Martha to put her heart ahead of her pocketbook.

"What do you know about these people, except that they're immigrants?'" she demanded.

"I guess that's enough," Ed Foster said. Martha didn't even look his way.

"Why, Martha, you know yourself how those Swedes were a couple of years ago," Mr. Granger said. "These Eyetalians ain't likely to be any better."

There were times when I thought my aunt disliked Mr. Granger intensely. This was one of those times. Her wide mouth tightened and she flashed him a look that could have cut twenty pounds off his middle.

"Mr. Svendenborg was doing all right until he fell and hit his head on that rock," she snapped. "Furthermore, and for your information, the new people are Hungarians, not Italians."

"How do you know so much?" Ed Foster grunted sourly.

"I asked the station master at Bentonville. And if you want a little lesson in geography—"

"All I want is another drink!" Ed tilted the jug and took a long swallow and wiped his hand across his mouth.

The men were all talking at once, each one trying to argue Aunt Martha down by himself. I could have told them what chance they had. Then the baby began to howl. My little brother George had good lungs for six months old.

"SHUT that brat up!" my father yelled. Then he turned on Aunt Martha and my mother.

"When we want advice from you women we'll ask for it!" He glowered at them and caught a glimpse of me from the corner of his eye. "And who invited you in?"

"Don't take it out on him," Aunt Martha bristled. "I know what's eating you, Fred Richards. Just because things are bad you want to blame someone."

"You know too infernally much for a woman!"

"I'll say. She might get along better if she wasn't so smart."

That was one time Ed Foster would have done better to keep his mouth shut. Aunt Martha knew what he meant, she was blazing mad, and she was quick on the draw.

"I'd rather stay single than marry a human sponge!" She started out, stopped, and came back for a last shot at my father.

"You know I'm right. But you've let them talk you into this and now you're afraid to back down."

"Nobody's talking me into anything, least of all you!" my father shouted. But she wasn't listening any more.

"I suggest we men ride over and see the train come in," Mr. Granger said quickly.

That put an end to the confusion. Everybody was for getting a look at the Hungarians, especially me. I knew then why Aunt Martha had been teaching us about the Magyars the last week, about how they'd settled in Hungary and what kind of country it was. And also how they'd been fighting for their freedom for years, led by a fellow named Kossuth.

Mr. Granger was a slick one. He usually knew how to throw oil on troubled waters, as my mother would say. He was a lawyer of sorts who spent a lot of time in Bentonville but also owned a quarter-section in our township that he rented out on shares.

I went out with the men and watched them saddle up. When my father went to the barn for his horse I trailed behind him and led out the colt he'd given me for my last birthday. He didn't say anything so I figured it was all right to tag along.

We went up the school road to where it forked, took the left fork to the rail bed the railroad had started but never finished, and then followed that to town. It wasn't really a town, just a shack where the rails came to an end, a general store and postoffice, and a couple of big corrals that were used when cattle or horses were shipped. We had our so-called rodeo there too.

"Looks like we've missed most of the show," my father said as we pulled past the corrals. "They must have got that engine fixed faster than they expected."

Already the high stack was billowing out black smoke and we could see the fireman looking like an imp in the glare of the firebox, shovelling coal curiously. The engine had been switched, watered, and was ready for the trip back as soon as the last of the passengers was gone.

The railroad had provided buckboards to take the newcomers out to their lands, and far out on the prairie we could see a couple rolling along. A third wagon was just leaving, headed north and piled high with luggage and people.

Settlement in our part of the country had not been solid. Vacant half sections and quarter sections lay between ranches and farms, and it was onto these scattered lands that immigrants were moving. One last buckboard was still loading; it was pointed south and I knew that the people who clambered aboard were going to live on the north boundary of our own land.

We were a pretty solemn crew as we drew rein next to the tracks. The engineer and brakeman saw us and waved but nobody waved back. For myself, I didn't know which I was more interested in, the locomotive or the Hungarians. I decided on the Hungarians.

THERE were only four in this family that was moving in next to us. I couldn't agree with Mr. Granger that they looked dangerous, but they certainly were colorful, especially the feminine half of the family.

Mother and daughter were blondes, the little girl being almost white haired. She was about my age, and, although I tried not to admit it to myself, as pretty as a girl could be. She was dressed the same as her mother, in white, with a white cotton vest that had fancy red embroidery all over; her hair was in braids tied with bright ribbon and she wore patent leather boots that flashed in the sun.

I saw her look at me and start to smile but I pretended not to notice and sat up straighter in the saddle and turned down the corners of my mouth, same as my father and the other men.

They were watching the father and son pile furniture onto the buckboard. In sharp contrast with the women, these two slant-eyed men were swarthy. Both wore black suits, but their blouses and vests were brightly embroidered and their open-top boots glistened.

Their black mustaches were huge and curving, the father's tinged with iron gray as was the black hair that showed under the broad brim of his flat-crowned black hat. He was no longer young, hardly taller than I, but with immensely broad shoulders and a swift gracefulness of movement.

The younger man had his father's width but was almost a foot taller. He had white teeth that showed often when he laughed. He hoisted a huge, brass-bound trunk onto the buckboard, leaned over and waved to the little girl.

"Illona!" he called.

She came running and he leaned down and scooped her up in big hands and set her lightly on the trunk. Then he made her a curtsy, as though she were a queen on a throne. Her delighted laughter made a shiver run along my spine and if my father hadn't been there I would have shown off by standing on my head in the saddle.

When the men had all their belongings piled in the wagon they helped the mother onto the seat next to the driver. They were going to ride in back with the girl.

"See what they got there?" Mr. Granger said. He tilted his head.

"Where?" my father asked.

"There. Next to that bedding."

"A fiddle and an a-cordine," Mr. Jimson muttered sourly. "Reckon they'll be more for dancing than plowing. They won't do."

"Not at all," Mr. Granger said. A murmur of agreement came from the rest of the men. I nodded my head. These people wouldn't do. That was all there was to it.

"What's wrong with playing music, huh, pa?" I heard myself say. I was astonished. The words had come out by themselves. My father frowned.

"Keep your tongue still or I'll play you some music on your ears," he said.

Until then I'd been secretly hoping the blond girl spoke English. Now I prayed she didn't. I felt two inches high. Only lately had my father been so sharp with me. I looked at him and saw him shift uneasily in his saddle. Then his eyes widened.

Both men had turned from the buckboard and were coming toward us, tentative smiles on their faces. We were a grim, hostile bunch but they kept coming. The older man got a step ahead when they drew close. He made a little bow.

"I am Bela Horothy," he said slowly and with a heavy accent.

Our reply was an ominous silence.

I HAD known it would be like that, but deep inside of me something was crawling. My face burned and my body felt hot. I didn't know what was wrong with me; this was a sensation I'd never before experienced. Later I learned it was shame.

I saw the little girl watching us and I forced myself to look at my father. His face was gray beneath the tan and hard as stone.

Mr. Horothy had stopped, his hand

half extended. The smile was gone from his eyes. But it had not been replaced by fear; his eyes were hot and black and shiny. His jaw was square and unyielding. His son had the same look, but mixed with a bitter anger. Then they turned on their heels and went back to the buckboard.

We watched them drive off and waited until they were almost out of sight before we pulled away. They had taken the wagon road; we went back along the rail bed.

"Did you see his eyes?" Mr. Granger said. "Or the look on that young one?"

"Murderous," Mr. Bellew agreed. They turned to my father.

"I don't think they'll scare easy," was all he would say.

"Better for them if they do," Ed Foster blustered. "We mean business."

I knew they did. Even Tom and Bob Enders, a pair of middle-aged and quiet bachelors, looked as though they were boiling for a fight. It was not many years since gunfights and lynchings had been common in our district. Most of the men had participated in one or the other.

"Let's try to do this without violence," my father said gravely. "You all saw the woman."

"Why, Richards," Mr. Granger said, "you know we'd none of us want violence. But it's ourselves and our own families who should come first."

He got a chorus of agreement on that. I wondered a little because Mr. Granger had no family that I knew of. Neither had the Enders brothers, but they chimed in heartily too.

"If the woman could get all the way out here, where she wasn't invited, she can go back the same way," Bob Enders said.

Mr. Granger bobbed his head up and down so hard his jowls shook. He gave the matter some judicious thought, wiped his hand across his mouth before speaking.

"It seems, then, that we are all agreed. Now, it also appears to me that if we make our meaning clear to these people we should have no trouble. And the sooner we get started, the better. My suggestion is that we meet tonight about ten o'clock and make a round of visits."

He nodded his head at Mr. Bellew.

"Better bring along a few of your men. I'll pick up Vannier and Bates on my way in. Oh, yes; it wouldn't hurt to have your men armed, Bellew. Just to make a show, of course.

They left it at that and we rode our separate ways. Mr. Jimson went as far as the forks with my father and me. From there we could see the new people across the prairie. They were dragging their stuff into a cabin which had been built on their land years before by a trapper.

The cabin sagged and was about ready to come apart. I started to feel sorry for those who had to live in it, but then I reflected that they wouldn't be there long.

AUNT MARTHA and my mother were standing on the porch when my father and I rode into the yard. They went inside as soon as they saw we were all right.

My father left me the job of taking the horses to the barn. I unsaddled them and hung up the gear and got some water. I got oats from the grain bin for my father's roan, then as an afterthought I got some for mine.

I went around the back of the house, figuring to go down to the cellar for some hickory nuts. When I got back there my mother was standing in the kitchen door. She said for me to come into the house. My aunt was waiting there too.

"Well, what are they like both of them asked at once.

"Gee, I don't know."

Of course I did know. I told them how there were four in the family and I described the clothes they wore. For some reason I didn't say much about the girl, and for an entirely different reason I skipped what happened after the father told us his name.

"Mrs. Horothy is kind of fat," I told my mother. "Something like you were last year for a while."

Aunt Martha snickered and put her hand over her mouth.

"What about the son?" she asked quickly. I scratched my head and considered what I might have left out.

"Nothing special, I guess. Only he look like Ed Foster better not pick no—"

"Any," Aunt Martha interrupted.

"What? Oh. Well, Ed better not pick *any* fights with him."

Aunt Martha made a wry face. Besides his drinking, Ed Foster had a way of getting into scraps. He usually won, too. I didn't know what made me think this other fellow could lick him. It was just a hunch.

"Oh, yeah," I added with a sneer. "They got a fiddle and an a-cordine."

"We could certainly stand a little music and gaiety around here," Aunt Martha said. "And the word is accordion."

I was glad when my father hollered for supper and I was saved any more lessons. Sometimes it was tough to have an aunt who taught school.

My mother took a minute to go in the bedroom to see how the baby was. Then she and my aunt got supper on the table. My father said grace and we ate.

They tried to pump my father the way they'd pumped me, but he wasn't having any. He just wouldn't say a word, just sat there and ate with his face looking strained. When he was finished he pushed back from the table and went out on the porch and rolled himself a cigarette.

I usually had to help with the dishes. That evening my mother said she thought I could spend the time to better advantage with my spelling book. I did my best but couldn't concentrate because she and Aunt Martha buzzed so loud in the kitchen. An added distraction was the face of a little girl named Illona which kept getting between me and my book.

A little after nine o'clock my father came in and clumped heavily into the bedroom. I watched him walk out again, buckling on his gunbelt. I dropped my book, my mother let her sewing fall into her lap and Aunt Martha sat bolt upright in her chair.

"Where are you going?" my mother asked. My father just shrugged and Aunt Martha said in a strangled voice, "What's come over you, Fred? What are you going to do?"

"Never mind what's come over me or where I'm going or what I'll do."

HIS voice was hoarse, as though he had a cold on his chest. But there was an utter finality to his tone that silenced my aunt. Lines of sadness softened her face and I was suddenly aware that she could be pretty.

For once it was my mother who would not give in. She shoved her sewing aside and jerked her head at me.

"Get something warm on, Bill. You're going with your father."

"Bill is going to bed, nowhere else," my father said flatly. I stayed where I was, caught in the middle.

"You wouldn't do anything you'd be ashamed to have your son see, would you?"

"I'll do whatever I think is necessary.

Let me decide. Bill's place is right here, not out at night with a bunch of men."

It is astonishing how you can know people for years and never really see what they look like. They have an everyday face that goes with everyday behavior; but when strain draws their skin tight there is another face that shows through from beneath.

My father had always seemed so big and solid and confident. Now he was changed. His features showed a troubled uncertainty. And my mother, usually so placid and ready to give in to him, had changed too.

Her softness was gone. She stood square on her feet and faced him. She was not confused, not uncertain, not ready to compromise.

"Someday Bill will be a man. He might as well learn now how men do things. And there's nobody else but his father to teach him. Do as I say, Bill. Put on your coat."

I was scared. I just sat there and rubbed my knuckles in my palm. I swung my eyes up and back between my parents. My mother had her hands on her hips, her manner at once resigned and unshakable. My father had his lower lip between his teeth.

"All right," he said suddenly.

He spun about and walked swiftly out onto the porch without looking back. I stared at my mother. She jerked her head toward the bedroom and I went and got my coat and followed my father outside.

We saddled our horses in silence. He had nothing to say to me and I was too frightened to talk or even ask questions. Although the night was clear and starlit and not very cold I felt chilled.

Most of the men were at the meeting place; the rest arrived soon after my father and me. The last to come were Mr. Bellew and his men. They came over the prairie in a dark knot.

"What do you know?" Ed Foster said when he saw me. "Bill is growing up. How about a drink, boy?"

"Let him alone," my father said.

Nobody seemed to want to talk much. We sat there for a few minutes, undecided, and then Mr. Granger took over. Across the prairie we could see a light from the Horothy's cabin. Mr. Granger stabbed a finger at it.

"We'll start with the nearest," he said. "Let's go."

I tried to stick close to my father as we rode, but found it difficult. Whenever I got near he would edge away. Under my coat my heart was pounding.

I had a confused feeling that this was a sort of dream, that when we got to where we were going the cabin would not be there. But the light kept getting stronger. We went slowly, at a measured pace, yet in no time at all we were there, about a hundred feet from the cabin, and Mr. Granger was heaving himself out of the saddle.

"All right," he said. "Who will go with me? You, Richards? Bellew? Vannier? The rest can wait here until I call."

IT SEEMED to me that none of them were in any hurry, but they dismounted. I watched my father and the other men gather around Mr. Granger and turn toward the cabin. They moved very slowly. Beside me Ed Foster tilted a bottle to his lips, then passed it to the man on his other side.

Suddenly a thin, high shriek cut through the night. It took us by surprise, lifting us straight in our saddles. It ended sharply, then came again, the scream of a woman in pain. And it came from the cabin.

"What the devil?" I heard my father say.

He moved faster, began to run. He was all alone, in front of the other men, and I was scared. I didn't know what he was going to do. Mr. Granger yelled after him but he paid no attention. Then he was at the cabin door and pounding at it.

The door opened. Framed in yellow lantern light I saw Mr. Horothy. The little girl was clinging to him, her hair like gold in the light. Both of them looked frightened.

Mr. Horothy stared at my father, then turned back into the cabin as the scream came again. He looked back to my father, looked past him, and saw all of us there on our horses. His hand came up to his throat as though he were choking.

I couldn't hear what my father was saying; Mr. Horothy heard him but couldn't understand. My father resorted to gestures, apparently peaceful ones, for the other man seemed to relax. He turned back into the room, pointed, and spread his hands helplessly.

In the meantime, Mr. Granger and the others had moved up closer. The mounted group was also edging forward, but we were not yet near enough to hear what Mr. Granger said to my father. Nor did we hear my father's low reply. Then Mr. Granger's voice went up, carrying a thinly veiled threat.

"Don't go soft on us, Richards. We came to move them out. Don't forget it."

"Not tonight, Granger," my father said.

"Tonight. Right now. Are you going to back these foreigners against your own people?"

"Not tonight, I said. Maybe not any night. These are people too; human beings, Granger. No, I wouldn't come any closer if I were you."

His voice lifted.

"Bill! Come here, Bill."

I pulled up just behind Mr. Granger and Mr. Bellew and looked over their heads at my father.

"Get your mother and your aunt. Tell them to bring blankets and plenty of sheets. And tell them to hurry!"

His eyes left my face and fastened on Mr. Granger. My father's hand was on the butt of his gun. Whatever uncertainty had claimed him before was gone now.

"Not another step, Granger. Or any of you. As God is my judge, I'll shoot you down."

I was riding then, as fast as I could. I used my hat as a whip, kicked my heels crazily against the colt's flanks. And all the way home I was listening for the crack of guns. My father had meant what he said.

MY AUNT and my mother were still up. They came rushing out with fear on their faces as I flung myself off the colt's back. I shouted my father's message and they scurried back into the house.

By the time they were out again, their arms filled, I had the buggy out of the barn and a horse backed into the shafts. The buggy was a fragile thing, my father's only extravagance, and I had driven it but twice before, on the school road and with him beside me.

Now I sent it flying over the prairie, disregarding the bumps that made the women hold on with all their might. Once the horse screamed as I laid the whip across its back, but it surged forward with a fresh burst of speed and I paid no heed to my mother's cry of fright. And when we got there my father still stood in the doorway.

The men were still there, too. They parted unwillingly to let the buggy through and I brought it to a stop beside the cabin. My father did not look at the women.

"Inside," he said. "Shut the door behind you."

With the shutting of the door there came a lift of tension. Hoofs scuffled in the dust of the yard. Mr. Granger climbed heavily back in his saddle, looked long and hard at my father, then swung away. The rest followed him. My father's hand dropped on my shoulder.

"That was fast work, Bill," he said as we watched them go. "You're a good boy."

We waited then, for what seemed hours. My father rolled one cigarette after another and smoked them down to his lips. There were no more cries from inside the cabin, but after a time Mr. Horothy and his son and Illona came out to stand beside us, and later yet a sudden bawling.

Then, in a little while, my mother came to the door and called the three inside. And still later she and Aunt Martha came out and we got into the buggy and drove home with my father riding beside us. There was no talking at all until we were home and my mother had made some coffee.

A baby girl had been born to the new people, my father and I learned. And Mrs. Horothy was fine; she had wanted to get up even before my mother and aunt left. There had been no pain, really. It was fright and lonesomeness which had made her cry out. Somehow the talk shifted.

"The young man seems awfully nice, doesn't he, Martha?" my mother said. My aunt nodded. "His name is Sandor, isn't it?" My aunt nodded again.

"It's a shame, Martha, you didn't have time to put on your red waist. It gives you such nice color."

Aunt Martha flushed and my father let out a shout of laughter.

"Vanity, thy name is woman," he said. I wondered what he meant. "Let's go to bed, Bill."

I had forgotten all about the rodeo. But early that morning I heard a wagon rattling nearby and looked out. It was a family that lived ten miles south of us, headed for town. They had a big basket of food in the back of the wagon.

My father had heard them too. He came out of the barn, where he had been fixing some harness, and waved to them and stopped to talk a while. After they left he went back to the barn. I followed him inside.

"What about the rodeo?" I asked. "Aren't we going?"

He shrugged. "I don't know, Bill. It probably won't amount to much. Anyway, once you've seen one, you've seen them all."

I could have thought of plenty of arguments. But I didn't use them. I knew he hadn't given me his real reasons for not going.

"Sure," I said, and turned to go.

"Wait, Bill," he called after me. "On second thought I don't see why we shouldn't go. Tell your mother to get things ready. I'll be in soon to wash up."

I RAN back to the house and told my mother. She seemed surprised, as though she hadn't been expecting us to go. She and Aunt Martha looked at each other and my mother worried her lip. Pretty soon my father came in.

"Well," he said. "Thought I'd find all of you scurrying around."

"Fred, do you really think we ought to go?" my mother asked.

"Why not? We go every year, don't we? And have a good time, too. I was even thinking we might pick up that little girl—Illona, isn't it?—and take her along."

"I really don't know. Last night I

saw the way Mr. Granger and those men looked at you. There might be trouble."

"You let me worry about that," my father said. He had been smiling but that was gone now. "There won't be any trouble. You better get started, now, or we'll miss part of the show."

He looked at my aunt and winked.

"Better wear your red waist, Martha," he said. He was smiling again.

"I never saw a man so changeable," my mother said.

But she didn't argue any more. While my father washed and shaved, she and Aunt Martha made a huge stack of sandwiches. I was hopping with excitement.

My father's suggestion that we take Illona put me in a dilemma. Usually we all wore our best clothes. But there was a chance that if I didn't, this time, my father might let me get in the steer riding contest. I asked him. He thought it over, his eyes twinkling, and finally told me I'd better wait another year.

As usual, it took the women a long time to get dressed. My father and I hitched up the buckboard and carried out the food, and then we had to wait. Finally my mother came out, carrying the baby. Last of all was Aunt Martha. She had her hair piled high and her lips were so red I suspected her of having put cherry juice on them.

Mr. Horothy was outside, chopping wood, and when he saw us coming he ran in and called the others. Even Mrs. Horothy came to the door, her sleeves rolled up and her arms soapy as though she had been washing clothes. She looked fine.

First thing my mother and Aunt Martha did, they had to go inside. When they came out again we tried to explain where we were going and that we wanted to take Illona. That was hard to do; they couldn't talk English and we couldn't talk their language. Somehow, though, we got it across, partly by pointing at the food and partly by making all sorts of motions.

Aunt Martha did most of the explaining, and she must not have done perfectly because Mr. Horothy and Sandor thought they were invited too. My father laughed and said for them to get on. They talked it over with Mrs. Horothy and she must have told them to go. They kissed her and waved goodbye and we rolled away.

Everybody for miles around was there. Even the stationmaster from Bentonville had come down. Mr. Bellew had his team, guarded by a couple of men, and there were steers in one of the corrals. In the other corral a bronc-busting contest was already in progress.

Mr. Granger and most of the men from the night before were standing in a group. They had been passing a jug around and they looked flushed. We had to go past them after we'd parked the wagon, and Mr. Granger made out that he was too busy talking to see us. But my father wasn't one to pretend.

"Fine day, Granger," he said, looking straight at Mr. Granger.

"Why, I guess it is, Richards," Mr. Granger said. "Fine day."

Aunt Martha was pointing something out to Sandor and they were laughing and not paying any attention to us. Ed Foster looked mad. He muttered under his breath. Then the stationmaster came up. He knew most of us by sight, although Bentonville was too far for us to go in often, and he said hello all around.

"Looks like everyone's here, don't it?" he said. "Even some of the new folks. That's just fine. I was talking to a fellow from our road the other day, Granger. He was telling me these people just beat you to the buy."

"How do you mean?" my father asked quickly. Mr. Granger answered.

"Why, I'd heard about them coming in, so I figured the best thing to do was snap up the land quick as I could and shut them out. It would have pressed me for cash, but I was willing to do it."

"That's what I call public-spirited," Mr. Jimson said. They all looked meaningfully at my father.

The stationmaster felt the strain.

"Well, as I said before, a fine day. And everybody's here for the show," he chattered.

"Including some that don't know one end of a horse from the other," Ed Foster said pointedly.

AUNT MARTHA started a hot reply but my father threw her a look and she snapped her mouth shut. We went off and found an empty space near a tree and spread out our stuff. My mother put the baby on a blanket in the sun.

For a while we could see well from where we sat. Then the crowd got thick around the corral. Aunt Martha, Mr. Horothy, Sandor, Illona and I got up and moved closer.

At first Illona was shy, keeping her eyes on her hands most of the time and refusing to look at us. She walked between her father and me. I was very conscious of her nearness but didn't know how to break the ice.

I tried to think of something that would make her notice me or maybe make her laugh the way she had the day before when Sandor sat her on the trunk. Her head came just below my eyes and in the sunlight her hair was the color of my mother's worn wedding ring. There was always the chance some other boy might make a slighting remark; I thought of what I could do then.

But there were few boys around my own age, and they were all intent on the riding contest. The ice was broken in another way. The five of us were working through the crowd around the corral when Illona stumbled and almost fell. I caught her arm and held her until she regained her balance.

She started to pull away, stopped and turned toward me. It was the first time she had ever looked straight at me. Her eyes were almond shaped and a deep blue that was near violet. She gave me a tiny curtsy and a smile that set my heart pounding.

Then we were up against the rails of the corral, our faces pressed against the bars while the others looked over them. Aunt Martha was pointing out objects and naming them to Mr. Horothy and Sandor. I showed Illona the animal that had just thrown its rider and said, "horse." I felt proud when she repeated the word.

Behind us some of Mr. Bellew's men were leading saddled horses around the corral and we turned to watch them. I saw Ed Foster eyeing us. Then the next bronc was ready in the makeshift chute and we turned back.

A hoarse voice at our backs made Aunt Martha and me swing around again. Ed Foster was bulling his way through the people behind us. There was no reason for him to push. The crowd had thinned at that point. Some of the people laughed. Ed looked drunk.

Then he was very close and I knew he was not nearly as drunk as he was acting. He shoved me and Illona out of the way, crowded past Aunt Martha without looking at her, and bumped into Sandor.

"Why don't you watch yourself?" Ed growled at him.

Sandor stared at him blankly, not understanding, and spread his hands. Ed stepped in and hit him flush on the jaw, and knocked him down.

Mr. Horothy tried to get past Illona and me but by the time we were out of the way Sandor was back on his feet. Ed charged him and hit him in the face again, sending him back against the corral bars. Sandor's nose was bleeding. His father shouted to him but he waved Mr. Horothy away.

The crowd made a big circle around the two men. Sandor tried to fight back but he didn't seem to know how. Ed kept hitting him at will although he couldn't knock Sandor down again. I saw my father and mother come running and I heard my father cursing.

It was just then that Sandor gave up trying to fight with his fists. The next time Ed rushed, Sandor took the punches and did not hit back. Instead, he threw his arms around Ed in a bear hug. His face contorted with effort as he squeezed, and Ed's mouth popped open in pain. Then Sandor had him in some strange grip and was whirling him around and around. When he let go, Ed sailed through the air and hit the ground with a thud and lay very still.

There were a lot of people around who didn't like Ed Foster. I heard more than one say he was glad Ed had finally got what was coming to him. Then something happened to make us forget the fight. A steer broke out of the other corral and ran wild.

It started our way and sent the people flying out of its path. Then, suddenly, it swerved and was headed the other way. I heard a woman scream. It was my mother.

She and my father had left the baby on the brightly colored blanket. And it was straight at that patch of color that the steer was charging!

ALMOST everyone froze in his tracks. The rest didn't know what to do. Except for Sandor. He knocked people aside in a rush toward one of Mr. Bellew's horses, flung himself into the saddle and was off like a bolt of lightning.

Aunt Martha had read to us from a book that said Magyars were great horsemen. Sandor proved the book was right. He beat the steer by yards, leaned far out of the saddle, and scooped up the baby. When he handed the baby down to my mother, who was crying, there were cheers from the crowd. Sandor was a hero and I was as proud as if he'd been my brother.

Everyone crowded around him and wanted to shake hands or pat him on the back. A late arrival, a big, white haired man in a black frock coat, pushed toward us, his voice booming over the crowd.

"Finest thing I ever saw. He ought to get a medal!"

It was the circuit judge who held court in Bentonville once a month. Judge Fraser had been in the Civil War and had medals of his own and everyone spoke highly of him. He clapped Sandor on the back and shook hands with my father and mother. He also said how big I'd grown since he last saw me, and how pretty Illona was.

"I thought you'd be up north this time of month, Judge," my father said.

"I was, but I had some news that made me hurry down. Knew I'd find you all here today." His voice rose in a shout. "Gather around, folks!"

They all crowded close. The judge's eyes were sparkling as he beckoned them still closer.

"I've got two pieces of news, both good. Although maybe you've heard one of them." He looked questioningly at the stationmaster, who shook his head.

"Saving it, Dave?" the judge boomed. "Well, here it is, folks. The railroad is going all the way through!"

That was mighty big news and it

brought a shout. Judge Fraser hollered for order.

"I've got something even more important. It's been kept a secret from almost everyone because of fear of speculators. Now that there are so many settlers here the government has decided to build a dam!"

This time there was no shout. We were all stunned. It was a dream come true, too sudden and too wonderful for us to believe. We all knew what it meant—irrigation, lush crops, and land worth five and ten times what it had been worth.

Everybody was happy except Mr. Granger. I was surprised to see him edging out of the crowd, his face pale. My father saw him too.

"I'm beginning to understand a few things," my father said half aloud. "It was Granger who started all this fight talk, Granger who kept it going, Granger who tried to buy up the land. It makes sense now."

His face was bitter as he jerked away from my mother's restraining hand. Mr. Granger looked back over his shoulder and saw my father coming after him and started to run. But Mr. Granger was too fat to run very fast. My father was going to catch him.

ANSWERS TO

★ CATTLE-COUNTRY QUIZ ★

By JAMES A. HINES

If you got all twenty right, pardner, that takes the pot—saddle up and head West, pronto!

1. 1: Barbecue. 2. O-in-a-hole. 3. Box B.

2. The Texas longhorns began moving northward in large numbers about the year 1870.

3. His brand. He burned it in the wood of his wagons, traced it on the leather of his saddle and chaps, had it inlaid in gold and silver into the stock of his rifle and six-shooter, and had it printed on the head of his stationery.

4. That is when the cowboys guarded or held the cattle on the open range, when there were few corrals.

5. Death camas, lupine, loco weed, and larkspur. They sprang up in different places every year. The herder must be able to recognize them a jump ahead of the sheep and head them in another direction. Death camas and lupine will poison and kill. Loco weed drives sheep crazy. Larkspur is fatal to young lambs.

6. Daniel Freeman was the first person to homestead in the United States, under the Homestead Act of 1862.

7. In the early days of the West, the first-comer was allowed to brand a maverick, if he was the first person to catch it. Many and many a cattleman in the early days got his start, as the old-timer did, "with nothing but a branding iron."

8. The first telegraph station located in Arizona was at a fort known as "Winsor Castle."

9. He means that he roped the calves, that is, caught them with a loop around their hind legs and dragged them out of the herd to the fires where the branding irons were heating.

10. True. In the range country there are many unwritten laws of conduct. For instance no person of the West will eat in a sheep camp or cow wagon without washing his dishes afterwards; nor will he ride through a gate and leave it open so that valuable stock can stray.

11. That is the different herds of cattle all thrown together, and going up the trail under one main brand.

12. The cowboy term "riding point" means riding abreast of the leaders of the herd. Generally always the most experienced cowhand and the segundo rides point. One on each side of the herd.

13. Henry Plummer, an outlaw-sheriff who terrorized the goldfields in the 60's.

14. A kack is a saddle.

15. Cornell University owns it, operating it as an experiment station for testing range-control methods and crop diversification.

16. The Western Trail ranged from central Texas, to Ogallala, Nebraska. The Chisholm Trail ranged from San Antonio, Texas, to Abilene, Kansas.

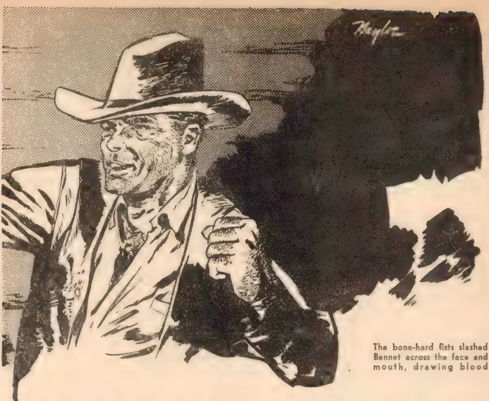
17. California, Colorado and Nevada.

18. 1. Dodge, Kansas. 2. Sidney, Nebraska. 3. Cheyenne, Wyoming. 4. Miles City, Montana.

19. His horse.

20. The Spanish term "*jaquima*" means a hackamore.

Bennet found out the hard way—a soft drawl can hide a tough character—even in the modern West



The bone-hard fists slashed Bennet across the face and mouth, drawing blood

"DON'T CALL ME PODNUH..."

by Berkeley Livingston

WILTON Bennet sighed in deep satisfaction. It had been an excellent breakfast. He lit a cigarette and let his eyes wander about the coffee shop of the Hilton House. He liked the Western atmosphere, the blow-ups of rodeo scenes, of mountain trails and people on horseback; in fact he liked everything about the hotel. He had a whole day and night to spend in Albuquerque. He had arranged it on advice of Larry Croyle back in Chicago. It had bothered him on the plane. But now he was rather pleased with the idea.

A very pretty girl walked into the coffee shop. She was dressed Western in blouse and divided skirt and a Stetson sat jauntily on her auburn hair. The counter was quite crowded, the only seat empty was one to his right. The girl looked about, and spotting the empty chair moved gracefuly toward it. Bennet felt a thrill of excitement at her approach. He didn't know why. It was something electric that stirred him . . .

"Someone sitting here?" the girl asked.

"Why no," Bennet replied. "At least not for the time I have been here."

The waitress knew her. Her name proved to be Lois.

" . . . Hungry, honey?" the waitress asked.

"Uhmm. Starving. No. 2 and bring me my coffee now, please, Aggie?"

"Right, Lois. In alone?"

Bennet, who pretended an interest in everything else, was listening avidly to the conversation, felt his heart sink. He waited with bated breath for her reply.

"Yes. Dad couldn't come. Y'know. The *season* . . . "

Bennet wondered what the girl meant. The way she underlined the word, season. Suddenly he became aware of someone standing behind him. He looked over his shoulder and saw it was an elderly man who was obviously impatient for his breakfast. His eyebrows questioned the empty plates before Bennet. Bennet turned his glance away and called:

"Miss . . . Miss. Uhh, I'll have the No. 2 also . . . "

Both girls stared at him in bewilderment. The waitress recovered first:

"The No. 2? But you just finished it . . . "

"Yeah," Bennet felt his face flush as he went on hastily, "still hungry I guess."

He felt the girl's eyes on him as he toyed with the bacon and eggs. He gave her a sidewise look and a crooked grin came to his lips.

"Why did you order that?" she asked unexpectedly. "You had just finished your breakfast."

His mind raced for an answer which wouldn't make him look the fool.

"I knew that old man who was staring over my shoulder. Didn't like him," Bennet said.

The words caught the girl with the coffee cup halfway to her mouth. Her eyes were wide and very green above the brown lip of the clay cup. Slowly she let the cup down. Her lips framed an "oh," but the sound didn't go past them. Instead she turned her attention back to her breakfast.

This time Bennet took the bull by the horns:

"I didn't know that man. I don't know anybody in Albuquerque. Truth to tell I'm in between planes and I, well, I just wanted to talk to someone."

She gave him a bright smile and said:

"Okay. I can imagine how you feel and we are a friendly people. Go ahead, talk. How do you like the southwest?"

"Wonderful. I'm on my way to Hollywood; I have a writing assignment there. But I was told to stop off here and spend a few days. It seems that Santa Fe isn't far off. Also Taos . . . "

Her eyes were wide once more. "Hollywood? You mean you're a movie script writer?"

HE FELT embarrassment. He had been a pulp writer for years, never attempting anything serious. But a year back he had thought up a wonderful theme and had done it up beautifully. One of the larger book houses had become interested on advice of a critic to whom Bennet had given the first four chapters and had brought it out. The book became a selection of one of the book-of-the month clubs and Bennet's fame was made. On the strength of the sale Hollywood had offered him a contract.

"Yes," Bennet said. "It seems that

my first movie's to be a Western. The studio thought it advisable I soak up a little atmosphere before reporting . . . "

"*Atmosphere!* How wonderful! But you can't get it staying at the Hilton House. I have a wonderful idea, mister . . . ?"

"Bennet. Wilton Bennet . . . "

" . . . Mister Bennet. My dad and I own a dude ranch in the hills close by. I just came into town to do some shopping. Why don't you come out to our place . . . ? Oh, dear!!"

"What's wrong?" Bennet asked as the girl placed her hand to her mouth.

"That sounded so, so forward. I didn't mean to be. Really! It is a wonderful idea, though."

"It surely is, miss . . . ?"

"Lois Grahame. And I *am* delighted at making your acquaintance."

" . . . A pleasure, Miss Grahame. And an excellent idea, if I may say so. How do we go about getting to your place?"

"Look. I have some shopping that may take an hour or so. It's a little after nine. Say about ten-thirty. In front of the hotel. I'll be there. A station wagon. It'll have Rancho Good-Will, on the doors . . . "

"Fine! See you then," Bennet said. He grabbed the check before she could stop him. His face bore a huge smile of delight as she shook her head in thanks.

" . . . Ten-thirty," she said in parting.

* * *

Bennet had his bags and golf clubs at the curb. She was as good as her word. Ten-thirty on the head and a new station wagon pulled up at the curb and Lois was behind the wheel. At her side, however, was a stranger, in cowboy get-up.

The man had a bronzed face, lean and long. Crisply curling hair black as pitch showed from under the rim of the Stetson. Nice white teeth showed from between thin smiling lips. But Bennet didn't like the other's eyes. There was something odd about their pale blue depths, something cruel and vicious.

" . . . Lon James, meet Wilton Bennet," Lois said in introduction as Bennet found a seat in the back.

James waved his hand backward in acknowledgment of the introduction and Bennet called, a howdy. He settled himself among the various things Lois had purchased in town. There were several saddles, a couple of boxes marked blankets, others of groceries, and various bundles without labels. In fact there was but a single seat for Bennet, so many were the bundles.

Lois drove on 66 for perhaps ten miles, then turned in on a blacktop crossroad. James, who had been silent during the ride on the main highway, suddenly found his voice.

"Wa-al, podnuh," he drawled. "How d'yawl like the West?"

A PAINED expression settled itself in Bennet's eyes and on his brow. If there was one single thing he disliked it was a Westerner who spoke like a movie version of the Westerner. Bennet had met a few men who had lived the greater part of their lives in the West and not one had a drawl or said, "podnuh." The words grated on his ear.

"Haven't been out here long enough to say," Bennet said.

"Wa-al," came the drawling voice again. "Ah reckin yawl will find it t' yore liking. Shore 'nough. Co'se yore a mite pale and fat but Miss Lois'll see to it thet you'll be a new man in a sho't time."

"Lonnie's our builder-upper," Lois put in. "He likes to take our guests for early morning rides. I warn you, Mister Bennet, he gives people a rugged time."

James laughed sharply at the words. There was an underlying note of anticipation in the laugh, Bennet thought.

"Miss Lois told me yore one o' them writin' fellers from Hollywood. Had Roy Rogers out here once. Nice feller. Knows hosses. Most folks from Hollywood too plumb soft. Don't stay thet way long. Not with me after 'em."

"I'm afraid you won't have the chance to get after me," Bennet said grimly. "I've always been the spectator type . . . " He came to a halt at the sudden expression on James' face. It was a compound of leer and something else. " . . . Besides, writers are notoriously lazy."

"I hear tell you writin' men are great hands for cards," James said after a moment.

"Cards . . . ?" Bennet began.

"Look! There it is!" Lois broke in.

Bennet followed the line of her pointing finger and saw a rambling line of pinkish stucco set on the very crest of a hill. The road curved toward the house and as they climbed details became more clear. The house was one-storied and covered a great deal of ground. There was a smaller structure about a hundred feet from the main one, and bordering the smaller place was a corral where Bennet made out several figures sitting and leaning against the railings. They were watching a man doing something to a calf. There were several cars parked in the driveway. And as they got closer Bennet saw that there were a couple of tennis courts and a swimming pool. All in all it was quite elaborate. And suddenly he wondered what he had gotten into. If his first impressions were correct this was a sort of New Mexico Sun Valley. Certainly he wasn't going to get a very satisfying impression of the West in the Rancho Good-Will.

Both Lois and James called greetings to people in the cars as the station wagon swept up to the door of the main lodge.

"This is it, Mister Bennet," Lois said as she slid out of the driver's seat. "I'll have a boy take your bags. Now come along and meet dad . . . "

JOHN Grahame proved to be a man in his early fifties, of medium height but whose heavy build and extremely wide shoulders made him look shorter than he actually was. He was dressed in an elaborate costume of Western clothes and wearing a pair of hand-tooled boots with heels that were a couple of inches in height. Lois had taken Bennet by the hand and brought him into the office of the lodge. Grahame was seated at an ordinary office desk. He was reading a letter when they entered. Bennet was quick to note that Grahame slid the letter out of sight the instant they entered. And that it was done surreptitiously.

Grahame threw his arm around his daughter's shoulder and with his free hand shook the one Bennet offered. His grip was firm and quick in release.

"Glad to meet you," he said. "Be here for long . . . ?"

"I don't know," Bennet said. "I have a few days anyway, that I know of. Perhaps I can make it a week."

"Dad," Lois broke in. "I really kidnaped Mister Bennet. He was staying at the Hilton House and I met him at breakfast, or should I say you picked me up?"

Bennet's face turned brick-red.

She went on:

"He's on his way to Hollywood and I thought that he might enjoy a few days here. Besides, he mentioned that he would like to get Western impressions before he got there; seems as though he's going to do Western pictures."

"Don't say," Grahame said. He looked the other over a bit more carefully than seemed necessary. He saw a medium tall man about thirty years old, though in fair shape. He had nice features, none of which obtruded on the other. Bennet's eyes were the best part of the face, brown and a bit slanted, they had a steady piercing glance, the kind that missed little of the exterior and saw a great deal more of the interior than a man might have wanted. "Maybe Lois gave you a wrong impression of our place. You see, this is a dude ranch. About all you'll see here will be Easterners playing cowboys for a while. Of course . . . "

Bennet turned his glance from father to daughter as the man looked oddly toward his daughter.

"Of course what?" Bennet asked.

"Like to gamble?" Grahame asked.

"Depends," Bennet said in a noncommittal tone. "Why?"

"Because," Lois said, "that's where our biggest income is derived from. You see that is really the reason why I wanted you to come here. I've always said that whoever does the scripts on most Western movies has never been in a real gambling place."

"You mean the dude part of this ranch is just a sort of front for the real enterprise, which is gambling?"

"Correct, Mister Bennet," Grahame said. "And I may say our service is of the best in either case . . . "

Bennet shook his head and turned to Lois once again. The same bright smile was on her face as before. But this time he noticed several things which he hadn't seen because his attention hadn't been brought to bear on them. Her smile and eyes were both a little too bright. And her nose had a pinched look at the nostrils. Her cheeks, smooth and tan as cream, held little touches of red in them high up along the cheekbones.

"Well, come along," she said. "I'll sign you in and you can change into other clothes if you like."

" . . . The Casino opens at eight for the money players," Grahame said in parting . . .

THE bellhop had a Brooklyn accent.

"Dere y'are, Jack."

Bennet, bent over a Pullman case on the bed, straightened and gave him an odd look from raised brows.

"Say! You're a long way from home, aren't you?"

"Not me," the other said. "Where the dough's at, that's home to me."

"Lots of it here, eh?"

"But heavy! No schmoes here, Jack . . . "

Bennet smiled and tossed the sharp-faced bellhop a half dollar. The other grinned, pocketed the coin and said as he re-opened the door:

"Anything else, Jack?"

Bennet shook his head, no, and the other left. Bennet finished unpacking and laid his clothes away. He changed into slacks and sport shirt and a pair of open-toed sandals and walked down the two flights of stairs to the lobby. The lobby was a little more crowded than it had been on his arrival. And there were a group of people in front of the desk. He saw Grahame standing in front of his office. The door was closed. He was talking to a roly-poly sort of man who was wearing an immense Stetson which almost hid his entire face so wide was the brim. There was an odd look on Grahame's face. It was so devoid of expression that it appeared more like a tight mask than a a face.

"Wa-al now!" a voice drawled almost in Bennet's ear.

It was Lon James.

"Comin' fur t'see the fun?" James asked.

"Fun?"

"Yep. Got me some folks wanta do some calf wrastlin'. They see it in some movie or other and think it's plumb easy the way some cowpoke does it."

"I gather it isn't easy, then," Bennet said.

"Podnuh! You spoke a mouthful."

"Don't call me *podnuh!*" Bennet exploded suddenly.

James stepped back a pace. His lips curled and his eyes narrowed.

"No? What'll I call you then?" he asked.

"The name's Bennet," Bennet said. Even as he said it he became aware of an odd fact. James had suddenly lost his drawl. He had spoken in quite correct English.

"Sho. O'course. I plumb forgot, Mister Bennet. Excuse me."

The return to Western style was done so casually only someone with the training of Bennet would have noticed the lapse in the first place. Of a sudden Bennet was certain James was acting out a part. It was well done. Almost perfect, in fact. Almost . . .

" . . . Sorry," Bennet said in quick apology "I used to do a radio script . . . a Western deal, and one of the actors used to give me that slow drawl. Drove me nuts for thirteen weeks. Guess that's why I left radio."

The apology didn't quite satisfy James, but he didn't make an issue out of it. He shook his head, turned on his heel and moved to the door where for the first time Bennet saw that a group of people were waiting for him. Lois's tall lissome figure stood out like a diamond among zircons in the crowd.

SHE was talking to several of the women and just as Bennet spotted her she turned and looked directly at him, and past him. He had started toward her the instant he had glimpsed her. But as the unmistakable meaning of her disinterested glance hit him his feet stopped their forward progress and turned toward the desk. He caught a last glimpse of her as she and the others, with James in the lead, stepped out of the wide doors.

As he neared the desk Bennet saw again the entries to either side of it. One door was closed. The other was open and he saw that it led to the dining room which had been done up to resemble a ranch's dining room. There were mounted deer and bear heads on the walls; stuffed fish gleamed iridescently from two of the walls, and above the mantle of the huge fireplace an old-fashioned rifle had been hung. A powder horn kept it company. A five-piece band, dressed as *Mariachis,* played Latin tunes on a platform at the far end of the room. Lunch was being served although it was a little early for Bennet's appetite. For the first time since his arrival Bennet wondered at the wisdom of his course. This might prove to be very dull, he thought.

A figure passed across his line of vision. It was the roly-poly individual who had been talking to Grahame. The man opened the door to the room the other side of the desk and passed within, closing the door after him. Bennet instantly followed. Beyond the door was a small room. Facing Bennet was another door, this one with a small square cut out of it about the height of a man's face. But before anyone could get to it he had to pass the inspection of the man who had been sitting just past the threshold.

Bennet had seen such individuals in various places before, all of them gambling joints of one kind and another. He looked no different than any other of the muscle men whose duty it was to pass inspection on people who wanted to play. He gave Bennet a sly look from under beetle brows whose peculiarly scarred eyelids proclaimed their owner as having spent a part of his life in the ring and not always on the giving end.

Evidently satisfied at what he saw the man stepped to the other door and knocked and when the square opened said something to whoever was behind it. Immediately the door swung open. Bennet smiled pleasantly and stepped over the threshold.

It was as though Bennet was back at Mike Fogarty's in Chicago. The same sheets were on the wall. The decorations were a lot different. But the people seemed cut from the same bolt of cloth. Bennet sniffed at the sharp odor of cigar and cigarette smoke, looked at the men and women gathered in small knots, each of them intent on what the loud speaker was blaring. A horse, named Going Places, was "a length at the half, Josie Pal, second, Farmerette, third . . . "

Along one wall was a bar. It was empty of patrons though a bartender stood and polished glasses as though he were preparing for a later trade. This was a narrow wall. Before the mate to it and all the way around until the wall ended close to where Bennet stood, were tables and counters, all covered with the usual baize cloths. Bennet didn't need an interpretation of what they were or their purpose. But all this was secondary in Bennet's interest. What had caught his immediate attention was the sight of the man he had followed talking to a lank individual in dark clothes, whose face had the somber look of an undertaker. The shorter of the two was speaking vigorously, marking his words with a worrying finger, shaking it up at the tall man's face now and then.

SOMETHING made Bennet walk with gently treading feet in the general direction of the two men. When he was some fifteen feet from them his steps became less general and more direct, but no less careful. Not that the deep pile carpet would have given up any sound which would have warned the two that there was an eavesdropper on his way, but Bennet was a more than ordinarily cautious man. He was almost at their side when the loudspeaker blared, "Josie Pal by a head, place Heyrise, show Going Places . . . "

Instantly some nine or ten of those listening to the race broke for the cashier's windows. It was a fortunate chance for Bennet. For the two who were his goal turned and watched the winners cashing their bets.

The tall man said, as though in continuation of something they had been discussing:

" . . . I don't like the way Grahame's playing. Look, Catsen. Don't be a chump . . . "

The short man in the wide-brimmed Stetson didn't look at the other. But his words were distinct and sharp:

"Don't worry about the old jerk. It's his daughter I'm thinking about."

"What can she do?"

"I don't know. But if she tries to queer this set-up, she'll find herself up a wrong alley. She and her old man . . . "

The tall one snickered shortly. "Hah! They never learn, do they? What'll it take to buy this joint out of hock, fifteen grand? I'll bet he could do it in a couple of months, that is if he could stay away from poker . . . Can I help you . . . ?" He had turned suddenly and confronted Bennet. The question had been pointed at him.

"Yes," Bennet said smiling. "I came in today. Heard a man can have a little fun if he wants to. But if that's all there is, nags, I guess I'll play golf or something then."

"We don't go until dark," the tall man said. "And then everything goes, mister. Come in. Lots of company."

"Swell," Bennet said. "See you later, then."

THE dust rose in a small cloud and settled slowly over the calf and the man kneeling at its side. The man was Lon James. A high cheer went up from the crowd that was mostly women. Bennet walked around one corner of the small corral. He had spotted Lois Grahame. She was standing, one booted leg thrust up on a log of the corral. A short, very bow-legged man in a weather-beaten Stetson and dusty levis was standing by her side. Bennet stepped to the other side of the girl.

"Hello," he made his voice casual.

"Ohh. Mister Bennet . . . "

"Most people I know call me Wilt," Bennet said. "That mister deal is kind of formal."

"Precisely, *Mister* Bennet," the girl said.

Bennet twisted his lips awry at the words. For the next few moments the three watched James as he showed the various guests how simple it was to throw a calf. Now and then the bow-legged man would spit a stream of tobacco juice into the dust of the corral. He had a small narrow face the color of well-worn leather, seamed and wrinked. His eyes were narrowed as though they had squinted into many suns. His mouth worked constantly over the chaw in one side of the jaw.

"Pretty fancy," he said after a while.

"Too fancy, eh, Gordy?" the girl said.

"Mebbe. Knows what he's doin' though," Gordy replied.

"Yes," she said slowly. "He does that. I guess it's just his manner."

"Not the only one," Gordy observed. "Different in the old days."

This time it was Bennet who broke the silence which fell on Gordy's words:

"The old days? How were they different?"

The girl gave him a look of disdain. Bennet bristled at the look. He wondered what the devil was possessing the girl. She had made it a point, an issue in fact, of his coming to this place, and now this coldness. He didn't like it.

"As I recall," Bennet switched abruptly, "it wasn't *my* idea, my coming here. As I recall," Bennet found himself repeating, "you were all sweetness and light about this place . . ."

"And now you don't find it like what you were told of, eh, mister?" Gordy broke in. He seemed to be grinning but with the tremendous wad of chew in his jaw it was hard to say yes or no. "Guess you're the writin' feller Miss Lois was talking of this mornin'. Surprised, eh . . . ?"

Bennet had done a slow burn at the words. Gordy went on and this time there was no mistaking the grin:

" . . . We-el. Mebbe she was right. Sounded kinda plumb foolish, way she put it. But she claimed it might work and besides, nothin' to lose."

Bennet felt like reaching above him. Certainly what the other was talking about was over Bennet's head. But one look at Lois's face told him that there was a great deal more behind the words than he realized.

"Had dinner yet, Mister Bennet?" Gordy asked unexpectedly. "We-el," he went on at the negative shake of the other's head, "might as well eat. Comin', Miss Lois?"

"Wouldn't miss it for all the caviar in Russia," the girl said.

THERE were seven others in the bunk house which was set up a hundred yards from the main lodge. There was a kitchen that was attached to the bunk house. The men were already at the long table when Bennet, the girl, and Gordy arrived. The men rose the instant they saw Lois but she smiled and waved them back to their chairs.

"By the way," Bennet said as Gordy dragged up chairs for them, "what about James and those others who were in the corral?"

"Those buckos are Lon's men. They don't eat here an' they don't stay here." Gordy said. "They live at the Rancho."

"You see," Lois said, "these men are the actual working unit of the Rancho Good-Will. The others, including James, are the show part."

The lunch was brought in at that moment, a thick roast of beef. For the duration of the lunch there was no more talk. But no sooner had the last of the men gone to their duties than Gordy brought up what had been on his mind.

"Soon as you went up to change yore clothes," Gordy said, "she come runnin' to me. Like I said before, I thought the whole thing was nuts. . . .

". . . I better start at the beginnin'. Old man Grahame, in the first place, owned all the land hereabouts. 'Bout the time Miss Lois was beginnin' to feed herself her mother died. Top of that come a bad year on feed and cattle prices fell way off an' her father had to take an awful loss. Bit later come the real bad years. Well, the old man lost most of his holdin's. Got left with maybe a couple hundred acres. Somehow he managed to save this and a little more. Then he gets an idea about a dude ranch. So he gets hold of me and I rustle up some of the old hands and we work it out. Everythin's going great. Miss Lois finishes school and comes to work and there isn't a cloud in the whole sky.

"But there's one thing we all forgit. The old man likes to play poker. There ain't no gamblin' in Albuquerque. Not legal nowise. But he finds it. What we don't know is that he loses. An' before we know it there's a mortgage on the place. So we start to work it off. The sky's clear again. Then comes a man named Catsen. Him and another feller, called, Holt. They closet themselves with the old man and next thing we know there's a casino, least that's what they calls it, in the rancho. It's as wide open as Las Vegas. An' the old man's sittin' in on some of the games. Then's when we discovers that the ones who got the mortgage is Catsen and Holt. Futher, they're not ordinary gamblers. They're from New York. Racketeers, is what they is. Mebbe worse.

"So we come to you. There's a fifteen thousand dollar mortgage payment left. Should be easy to pay off. Only thing is those two weasels declared themselves in. And when it comes to the payment of the money, they're in when the auditor gets there and they stand around to help. Miss Lois don't see hide nor hair of a single greenback. An' the same night the old man's playin' poker again.

"I don't have to tell you what happens. Man! You'd never guess what happens. Miss Lois gets an idee that you'd write this place up as the scene of a Western movie and she'd get the money and pay off the mortgage. . . ."

BENNET'S chin actually dropped and his jaw hung slack. If he hadn't heard Gordy he wouldn't have believed such a condition could arise in true life. Why it was wackier than any pulp plot. And yet. . . . He stroked his nose for a while, a habit of concentration he had, and thought deeply. Perhaps that was why the girl had acted so queerly. On thinking over what she'd done she may have realized the silliness of her action. But was it silly? He had told her he was a writer. What he hadn't said was that he had been given a far greater line of duty than the ordinary writer.

"My God!" he breathed aloud. "Even if such a thing could be done did you think a studio writer could manage to get the powers-that-be to okay the deal?"

Her answer was weak nor did she look at Bennet:

"I guess it was silly of me to expect anything. My only excuse was desperation. You were a straw I clutched at. . . ."

"H'm! When is this payment due?" Bennet asked.

"In three days."

Bennet went limp. He understood more fully why she had become so desperate. Further he understood more of what he'd overheard in the Casino between Catsen and the other. When Bennet had inked the contract with his studio he had done more than sign up as a writer. He had been given very broad latitudes; the matter of direction even, had been placed in his hands. It was entirely possible that he could get the studio to use the Rancho Good-Will as a locale. But in three days. . . .

"Well," Bennet said as he shoved himself away from the table. "I'm not promising anything but at least I'll try. Now where will you two be in, say, half an hour?"

"We can go for a ride," Lois said. "If you don't mind. . . .?"

"Mind? H'mmm. It'll be a pleasure. See you later. . . ."

THE sun had descended to a stage where in a short time night would fall. The air was redolent with the odor of flowers and mountain forest growth. One of the few things Bennet did well was riding. Lois had almost been born to a horse and she rode with all the ease of a lifetime in the saddle. The trail they rode led curvingly along the side of a hill. Now and then it widened enough for two horses to ride abreast. Their talk for the greater part of the ride had been in monosyllabic bursts. But as the afternoon waned both had grown more at ease with each other.

"Y'know," Bennet said, "I suppose I should know a lot about women, being a writer. But I must admit to only a small knowledge. I guess I write of women the way I'd like them to be. Of course they're not that way really. You, for example."

"Me?" her eyebrows arched in surprise.

"Yes. I couldn't understand the change in attitude. I mean this morning, well. . . ."

She understood then. "Oh! Maybe I realize that I had been a little forward. That I was just a cheap little schemer. I guess I was ashamed. You can't blame me for that, can you?"

Of course, he thought. It was the only logical reason for her attitude. But all that was changed now. He rode closer and smiled into her eyes. She answered the smile and said:

"I'm glad you don't have any hard feelings. I—I like you. And I like the way you've taken things."

"Don't call yourself names," he said. "I haven't been lily-white in soul myself. But that's under the bridge. And speaking of bridges this looks like one here. . . ."

She looked forward to where his hand had gestured and saw a natural arch of trees toward which their path lay. She knew the arch extended for some several hundred yards. Beyond, the mountain rose steeply and thinly until it crested on a rock-ribbed flatland. Soon they would be turning back.

"I'll ride ahead," she said. "There's a back road we take in another mile."

The green darkness enfolded them coolly and the sound of their horses' hoofs were muffled. All other sounds were muffled. They neither saw nor heard the small group of mounted men waiting their arrival out of the green tunnel. There was an instant of whirlwind action, too quick for anything to be done about it. Bennet knew only that a bearded man held his bridle on one side while on the other a grim-faced man whose narrowed eyes held a wordless menace, rode close to his side. Two others rode close guard to Lois.

And ahead, waiting their arrival, was Lon James.

". . . Figgered you'd be comin' along right soon," James said. "Well, *Podnuh,* this'll give you a right smart plot for a movie, eh?"

Bennet didn't answer. He looked around and noticed that the four who had intercepted them were armed. Pistols lay snugly in holstered readiness. Further, there was something about the keen-eyed watchfulness of these men which said as plain as words they knew the consequences of their acts and were prepared to pay the penalty.

"I don't understand," Bennet said. "What's the meaning of this?"

"Wa-al," James drawled, "I got to thinking that Miss Lois wasn't givin' you yore money's wuth. . . ."

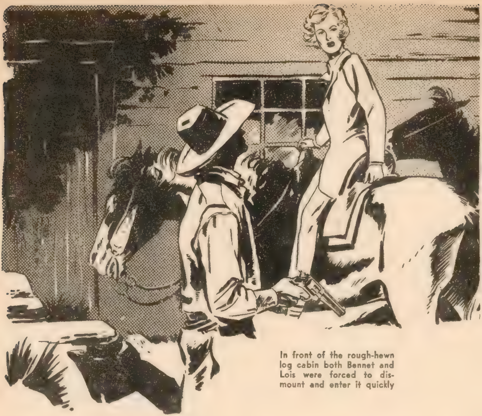
"You can cut out the fake drawl," Bennet broke in. "It's as phony as that gun you're wearing."

IT WAS done with the speed of lightning. One second the gun Bennet was talking about was in the holster strapped to James' left thigh, the next second it was in his hand. The explosive sound it made as it went off echoed metallically from peak to peak. Bennet's horse reared at the sudden sound and almost threw him. Even as Bennet sawed on the reins, he noticed that the men on either side grasped quickly with him.

"I don't like you, *podnuh,*" James said. "I didn't like you the minute I saw you. An' I'm not going to let you forget it. The next time this heater goes off I won't miss. All right boys, let's get cuttin'."

James whirled his horse about and started through the forest at a tangent to the trail they had been riding. The four men rode close herd on Lois and Bennet. It was close going because what little trail there was led between trees that almost rubbed bark so close were they. The going got rough and tough. The trail led downward seemingly into the very heart of the underbrush. They must have descended some thousand feet before they came into the open.

They were on the shore of a mountain lake. It sparkled brightly in the fading sunlight. The scene was breathtakingly beautiful. But Bennet was aware only



In front of the rough-hewn log cabin both Bennet and Lois were forced to dismount and enter it quickly

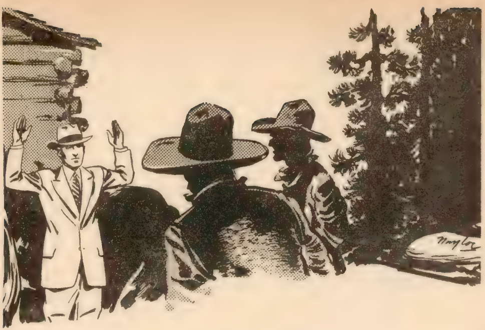
of the men who rode close to his and the girl's side. And once more the trail led upward. But always they followed the curving line of the shore. Suddenly James turned his horse inward away from the water. Both Bennet and Lois saw the cabin simultaneously.

It was rough-hewn made of logs cut expertly to join in an overlapping pattern. It wasn't large. Nor was it very clean. It was obviously a hunter's cabin. The man and woman were told to get off their mounts. Then, while two of the men rode off again, the other two and James shoved Lois and Bennet into the cabin.

Lois walked, straight-backed into the dark interior and leaned against the stone mantle of the open fireplace. Bennet moved to her side protectingly. One of the men, the tall bearded one, kicked a chair close to the door, pulled his gun from its holster and sat down on the chair. He looked at the two near the fireplace and an evil grin lighted his features. The second one, and Bennet saw that these two who remained were the ones who had ridden as guards to him, closed the door and leaned against the wall, his eyes intent on James.

As for the foreman he folded his arms across his chest and grinned at the two by the fireplace.

"That's right," James said after a second. "Make yourselves at home. Because this is going to be your home



until Friday."

"Friday!" Lois' voice rose. "But that's three days away."

"Right." James said. The grin was still on his lips.

"What's the idea?" Bennet demanded.

"Wa-al, *podnuh.*" James turned to the other. "It's like this. We decided that the girl's too nosey. So we figured it'd be better to get her out of the way. There's going to be a big game tonight and papa's going to play. Catsen's going to let the stakes go to hell. An' when they're through, why papa can go back to the dogies. Get it?"

"A rigged game, eh?" Bennet asked.

"N-no. Nothing like that. Just that Grahame won't have much of a chance, that's all."

"Well," Bennet said softly. "That's the way I imagined it would be. A couple of rats smelling the cheese. How come you won't be there? Maybe they'll cut you out."

JAMES turned his head to the two watchers and his eyes signalled silently. They arose and strolled close to him. He turned back to Bennet and there was a strange look in his eyes as he moved closer. Some sense of impending menace placed Bennet on the alert. It was a fortunate thing. For when James was just a couple of feet from Bennet he went into lightning-like action.

He shot forward, head bent low, shoulders hunched and his arms moving like pistons. The first blows sent Bennet reeling sideways from the fireplace before he could do more than lift his arms in a gesture of defense. A small cry that was more of alarm rose to the girl's lips. But after that she closed her lips until the soft flesh turned pale so tight were they held.

The bone-hard fists slashed Bennet across the nose and mouth and drew blood. It was just lucky that he had that instant's warning. James stopped moving forward and stood still regarding the effects of his blows with a quiet satisfaction. A slow smile came to the cut mouth of the man opposite. Blood leaked from his nostrils. But Bennet seemed unaware of it. The smile broadened. Quite suddenly James was aware that there was no humor in the smile. There was something terrifying in the way the man just looked and smiled. It was as though the other was waiting. . . . Once more James stepped forward, fists cocked.

It wasn't the complacent, seemingly docile Bennet, however. It was a tiger, a lion gone amuck. With a low growl from deep in his throat Bennet leaped forward, his arms pumping like pistons at the leathery muscular face of James. They met and for several seconds there was only the muted sounds of men breathing gustily and grunting with the effort of trying to slug each other into unconsciousness. Time after time James connected solidly, only to have Bennet recoil and come back for more. Nor was Bennet amiss in his duty. His fists though not as hard as the other's, and not having the muscle behind it, still did a greater amount of damage than James had imagined. For Bennet had right on his side and with every blow Bennet smashed at James, there was the inexplicable power of blinding anger. A terrific right which James in trying to avoid barely managed to evade, staggered Bennet off balance.

"Now!" James shouted.

Then it was apparent why the two had come so close. James wasn't taking any chances. If the guns he carried were not enough the fists of the three would be. But now Bennet no longer cared what happened. Fists, teeth, feet, anything and everything he could use as a weapon was going to serve. He whirled away from the new enemy and charged James once again. Only this time his attack was also vocal:

"Lois! Get out!" he shouted.

The bearded man turned just in time to see Lois make a dash for the door. He leaped in pursuit. Bennet forgot the other two. Lois had to get to the horses. His blood was pounding in his veins and his breath seemed as though it didn't want to come up from his lungs. He clubbed his right hand into the face of James, and started for the bearded one. His hand closed on the rough cloth of the man's shirt. It was the last Bennet knew. A blanket of stars shot through with revolving pinwheels burst in Bennet's brain. He plunged down into an inky pool of water . . .

"GET up," a voice called.

Bennet tried to do as he was bid, but collapsed to the floor with a groan of pain. His eyelids fluttered open. There were the hazy outlines of several faces bent over him. He groaned in pain as someone added a blow to another command for him to get to his feet. Somehow he managed to swallow the nausea which gripped him. As from a distance he heard a voice call, "Wilt. Please. Don't hit him again."

He tried to say, I'm all right, honey. But nothing passed his lips except a dribble of bloody spittle. Somehow he managed to stagger erect. The haze lightened for him and he began to recognize faces. They were all there, James, the tall bearded one, and the one with the oddly evil eyes. And tied to a chair was Lois. So she hadn't made good her escape.

Bennet felt a numbness beyond physical pain. It seemed to have definite boundaries. One extended along the whole line of his right jaw. Another centered along the lower ribs on the left side. But Bennet had eyes only for the girl in the chair. She looked as though she'd been manhandled. There was a dirt smudge on one cheek. And a small cut had dripped blood from above her eye to her pert and tilted nose. Bennet saw red.

He started in a weird sort of run toward James who was standing close to the girl's chair. But before Bennet had taken more than a few steps the tall man stuck out a foot and tripped Bennet. He didn't fall. Somehow he recovered his balance. Once more his lips framed that strangely terrifying grin.

"Gonna make you pay for that," Bennet said. " . . . Last thing I do . . . "

A hand reached over and slapped at his sore mouth. It reopened the cut and once more a thin line of red slid down to his chin.

"Aah!" James said suddenly. "Leave the goon alone. He's slug-nutty enough now. Throw some rope around him, Sliver, and you and Mike stay with them. I'm going back to the Rancho."

A rope snaked out and settled itself about Bennet's shoulders and slid down until it was around his chest. It tightened until his arms were snug at his sides. Then Sliver, who had thrown the rope literally dragged Bennet forward until he was alongside of Lois. Sliver threw a few more loops about Bennet, then made the rope fast. Mike threw an empty cereal case over and Sliver forced Bennet into it.

"There's stuff in the cupboard. Enough for the next couple of days," James said at the door. "Just be sure you guys don't let 'em get lost. See you Friday . . . "

The numbness was passing. In its place pain came. It was torture to turn his head in Lois' direction, Bennet found.

"Don't worry, honey," he said. "We'll be okay."

"I'm not worried, Wilt," she said smiling bravely. "I was just a little frightened. But now I'm not."

"You know I love you," Bennet said softly. "This isn't either the time or place. But I had to get it off my chest. Fell in love the first time I saw you."

She framed a kiss with her lips and blew it to him. "I love you too," she said.

HE SMILED and winced as the cut opened afresh. Though they spoke of love Bennet was worried. These gangsters in Western garb weren't going to stop at anything to gain their ends. Bennet was very much afraid. But not for himself. It was Lois. Already she had been manhandled. Which only meant the girl meant nothing to them because of her sex. If she stood in their way she would be gotten rid of in the same manner they would get rid of a man. But though he thought that his manner showed ease of mind.

"Don't worry, honey," he said. "We'll be all right and everything else will be also."

The darkness had come on quite suddenly. Sliver lit the two Kolman lanterns and Mike rummaged in the cupboard James had mentioned, for food. There were cans of beans and meats and sardines. There were also coffee and metal dishes for the food. Mike and Sliver ate first. Then while one stood guard with a .45 in his hand the other undid the bonds of the man and woman and allowed them to eat. Bennet had to give the devil, in this case, Mike, his due. He *could* cook.

The man and woman washed down the last of the food with the coffee. Once more Sliver stood over them with the gun and Mike started to bind them to their chairs.

"Drop it!" the voice was an exploding bomb in the silence of the cabin.

Bennet whirled at the sound. Mike

was standing, the reata loop extended for encircling Bennet in his fingers. There was a wary animal look in Mike's eyes. But before he had the chance to attempt what he might have, Bennet hit him with all his strength. The blow knocked Mike down though not out.

"Get Sliver's gun," the hidden voice said.

It proved to be a bit more difficult than just that. The words had barely died and Bennet was reaching for the gun when Sliver whirled and sent a shot crashing through the window. Bennet took a diving tackle for Sliver, but before his clutching fingers could grab the other Mike reached out and tripped Bennet.

Then for the first time Lois went into action. She moved with the speed of a tigress. Not a single one of those in the cabin had been paying any attention to her. The first they knew that she wasn't in the chair was when it came crashing down over Sliver's shoulders. She didn't stop at that alone. As his body slumped slightly, she drove it down again until the wood splintered against his bearded head.

In the meantime Bennet whirled and shook himself free of Mike's clutching fingers. By the time he whirled to face Sliver again, Sliver was out of action. And the enigma of the stranger was solved. It was Gordy.

The first thing he dove for was the gun which had fallen from Sliver's fingers. He was a streak of action. The man and woman had forgotten about Mike's gun. But not Gordy. Orange flame blossomed from the steel lips of the .45 as he shot from a crouch. A shriek of pain echoed the shot. The sound of Mike's gun hitting the stone of the fireplace came afterward. Gordy had shot the pistol from the other's fingers. It was Lois who pounced on it like a catcher going after a low foul.

"Tie them back to back," Gordy said after he got the two to their feet.

SLIVER had a bloody head for his pains. As for Mike, he was fortunate that Gordy was as good with a gun as he was. Mike's fingers would not be in use for a little while. They were numb from the shock of the bullet's kick as it spun the gun from his fingers. But that was all.

Bennet made sure their bonds were as tight as his had been. Further, he trussed their ankles together.

" . . . I don't want them to starve. But I don't want them to get out too fast either. They'll have a long walk, that's for sure . . . "

There was a moon to light the return path. Otherwise they would have been lost. As it was the going was precarious in the extreme. Gordy explained as they rode along single-file:

" . . . Got to wonderin' what happened to James and the rest. I never trusted those boys anyhow. Then Hanson come to me and said he'd heard one o' 'em say they was going to that old huntin' cabin that old man Smithers used. I didn't connect the two of you goin' off with their shovin' along until Hanson spoke up. Then it made sense. So I high-tailed it after."

"Without a gun?" Bennet asked.

"No time for that. Figgered I'd need more than that."

"Then why didn't you take the rest of the boys?" Lois wanted to know.

"Thet James man is a mighty smart hombre. Just before he left he decided thet there was a heap of work to be gotten out. So he sent my boys, all of 'em, down to the draw. By the time I'd got them the show'd be over, I figgered."

"But now what?" Lois asked bitterly. "We're free. But I still don't see how we're going to help dad."

"Maybe I can," Bennet said unexpectedly. "If we can only get there in time."

THE three leaped from their horses and ran up the path to the lodge. Bennet, in the lead, headed for the desk.

"Is there something for Wilton Bennet?" he asked.

The clerk looked wonderingly at the bruised faces of Lois and Bennet. But Bennet had no time for the clerk's unvoiced speculation.

"Well?"

"Oh. Oh, yes, sir," the clerk replied. "Came just about an hour after you left. Here you are . . ."

It was a Western Union money order. For fifteen thousand dollars. Bennet showed it to Lois and Gordy.

"It won't work Wilt," Lois said. "Dad's very funny. He'll think it's charity."

"Even from his future son-in-law?"

She blushed. But her answer was: "Yes. Even from you."

"Well," Bennet replied, "I wasn't going to give it to him anyway. This is for something else. By the way, when does this big game get going?"

Lois looked at her watch. "About an hour," she said.

"Good!" Bennet said in relief. "I'll have time to change and bathe."

He turned to the girl and before she knew what was happening he lifted her slightly off the floor and gave her a kiss full on the lips. She felt the pressure of his mouth for a surprised instant, then returned his caress with fervor. For the first time Wilton Bennet heard her laugh as he shouted with glee and dashed up the stairs for his room. It was a sound he wanted to hear again and again.

Gordy and Lois were waiting for him at the entrance to the Casino. She took his arm and with Gordy trailing, they made their entry. The first person they saw was James. He was walking toward a table at the far right hand corner of the room. There were four men at the table, Catsen, the tall man who was Catsen's partner, another who was a stranger to them, and Lois' father.

FOR an instant there was a tableau. Bennet felt his muscles tense as the hot eyes of James looked into his. Then James grinned boldly and walked on.

The game hadn't begun though it was apparent it would not be long. Several unopened decks of cards lay on the cloth. Just as the three reached the group the short, fat Catsen slit the cover to one of the decks and fanned them out. Grahame looked up, caught sight of Lois and her companions and started to smile a greeting. But the smile changed to a frown when he saw the tape she had put on under her eye.

"It's nothing, dad," she said to his look. "I fell from Smoky . . . "

Bennet didn't explain how he got the damages to his face. Instead, he said:

"Game open? Or is it a closed deal . . . ?"

Catsen looked to his tall funereal-looking partner. The other nodded shortly and said:

"Open. Table stakes. Chips run fifty, one, two and five."

Bennet threw the money order to the table and said:

"I'll cash that."

Catsen glanced at it, called to a cashier and handed the man the check. In a moment the man returned with a stack of chips. Bennet found a seat between Grahame and the stranger who was sitting on the old man's right. He counted his chips and discovered the smallest chip was for fifty dollars and the largest five hundred.

He glanced around, his eyes casual. But there was a prying interest in his glance. The smallest stack of chips was at the stranger's elbow. And that was about ten thousand dollars' worth. Catsen, his partner and Grahame were starting with about the same amount as Bennet. A card flicked from Catsen's hand and landed in front of Bennet. It was the ten of diamonds. The card was for deal, which Grahame won. And the game was on.

Bennet played casually, easily, and seemingly without too much interest. He stayed sometimes without reason, especially when the game was stud. In draw he seemed a little more careful. For perhaps a half hour the game was without interest. In that time Bennet was about three hundred ahead. Then came the first hot hand. The stranger was dealing at the time.

The game was draw, a pair to open. Bennet picked up his cards and found a pair of nines and a pair of sevens. He tapped his fingers on the table in a check bet. Everyone checked until Catsen, sitting at the dealer's right, opened. The dealer saw, Bennet saw and Grahame kicked the bet for a hundred. The tall man folded his cards but Catsen saw the raise. The dealer kicked this time for two hundred. And Bennet sat for a second in silence and looked at his cards. He knew what they were and he knew almost exactly what the others held. He held his cards up so that the girl and man behind him could see them.

"In or out?" the dealer asked.

Bennet shrugged his shoulders and saw the raise. This time Grahame and Catsen only saw. The dealer looked questioningly at Bennet and Bennet scratched his head. He had felt the minute lacerations at the very tips of the cards. Little nicks, so small only an expert could know their meaning. Bennet had figured this hand out fairly well. He was supposed to draw a single card and get a filler for his full house. The cards had been fixed for that. Grahame probably had three of a kind and would draw two. Bennet would have been willing to bet every chip he had that Grahame would get a fourth to his three. Catsen would not fill and would throw in his hand. Then, since it was in the fix for Grahame to fill four of a kind, the dealer would have to have either a straight flush pat or draw one to fill. Probably the latter. That would make Grahame think he was trying for a simple flush.

Bennet knew the cards had been fixed for the draw. He figured quickly. Catsen knew how the deal was to go. There was but one way to goof up the works. Bennet stood pat with his two of a kind. Grahame drew two and Catsen waited for an instant and looked at his cards. Bennet knew he had put the fat man in the middle.

A FLUSH settled on Catsen's cheeks. He also had three of a kind. The dealer was to deal him a pair and and take but one card for himself. Now the deal was changed by Bennet's refusal to draw. Catsen was too shrewd an article not to know that if he drew three cards there would be the smell of fish in the air. The betting had shown that a pair would be no good. And this game was not penny-ante. Suddenly he smiled and threw his cards on the table and said:

"Aah! Even if I filled, wouldn't do any good."

Grahame's four of a kind won the pot because no one saw his bet.

Bennet picked up the cards and started shuffling. Suddenly they spilled from his fingers and slithered across the table.

"Damn!" he exploded as embarrassment flooded his cheeks with red. "That was clumsy. Gimme another deck, will you?"

Catsen tossed Bennet a fresh deck and the writer broke the seal and shuffled, a little more expertly this time. But it was not in the fashion of the stranger who fondled the cards as though the deck were an apple he was shining in his palms. Bennet wasted little time. Once more the cards fell.

Grahame, first to bet, checked. They all checked. Bennett picked his cards up, looked at them and bet a hundred dollars. They all stayed. Grahame, first to draw, took three. So did the tall partner of Catsen's. Catsen drew two and the stranger two. Bennet stood pat.

"Again?" Grahame asked, smiling.

Bennet shook his head and waited for the betting to start. Grahame looked at his cards, closed them face down on the table and bet a hundred dollars. The tall man raised and the raise stood until Grahame's turn. He raised it two hundred. And this time Catsen kicked it. The stranger saw and Bennet kicked it this time. A hush settled over the table as Grahame looked at his cards. Then Grahame slowly shoved three five-hundred-dollar chips into the pile in the center. Some sense of the drama taking place at the poker table transmitted itself to the rest of the room. For suddenly the dice and other tables became deserted. And the crowd gathered about the poker table.

The tall man looked at the bet Grahame had made and shoved *four* five-hundred dollar chips onto the green cloth. And Catsen made it eight. All color and signs of emotion were wiped clean on the stranger's face as he took another look at his hand. There were four kings in it. It was going to take four aces or a straight flush to beat his hand.

The odds were all in his favor. The fact that Catsen and the rest had accepted this man showed he was all right. Therefore the deal was straight. He made the bet twelve of the blue chips. Bennet saw the bet and waited for Grahame. He knew what Grahame had, four aces. The old man's face was pale and his hand trembled a bit as he began to fumble with the chips. This was the kind of hand a man dreamed of. Everyone had filled. But who could fill to beat four aces. Besides the draw was the kind that showed they were filling three of a kind or pairs. That is, all but Bennet. He had had a pat hand. Probably a flush or full. . . .

Grahame shoved all his blue chips in and almost all his yellows, which were for two hundred dollars They all saw, all but Bennet. He kicked the bet another thousand, his last.

"Might as well be broke and happy," he said as he shoved the chips in.

There was an approximate sixty thousand dollars in the center of the table.

THEY all looked to Bennet whose raise had been called. And the writer in turn looked at each of them. But instead of turning his cards, he said:

"Y'know. I counted the money we each had before this deal. Grahame had eighteen thousand dollars. The rest of you don't matter because you're all a bunch of crooks. This game was rigged so that Grahame was to lose his pile. Actually, it wouldn't have made any difference who won, so long as Grahame didn't. Because he had to lose. Yep. Like the deal before mine. You're a pretty sloppy dealer," he spoke directly to the man on his right. "Even I could read those cards. But you were fixing them for the next time around. Okay. Grahame, you have four aces, Catsen, four queens, you, you skinny rat, four jacks and our crooked dealer here has four kings. But I have the winning hand a straight flush, deuce, trey, four, five and six of hearts. Now what?"

The what he asked about was unexpected. There was a sudden lightning-like move from James who was standing behind Catsen. They hadn't noticed that he still wore his gun. His hand shot down to his thigh and the .45 came up. But he hadn't reckoned with Gordy. As fast as James was, Gordy made him look slow. There was a sharp explosion from behind Bennet. Screams rose from the women who had been looking on and a shriek of pain and fear from James.

"All right, folks," Gordy's calm voice settled their fears. "Excitement's over. Calm down. . . ."

THEY were all gathered in Grahame's office, Lois, Gordy, Bennet and Grahame. He was sitting behind the desk and his fingers tapped on the glass top.

"There was one thing I forgot to tell you, Lois," Bennet said by way of explanation. "I said I wrote for a living. One of the books I wrote was an episode of crooked gambling. When James told us that the game was rigged I knew I had to sit in it. The tricks with cards that the man Catsen had brought in knew, were elementary to what I know. It was a simple matter to deal the hands I did. . . ."

"You mean," Grahame said, "that all the previous games had been rigged against me?"

"I'll bet on it."

"And I thought I was a smart player. . . ."

"You were but you had no chance against those boys. Now what are you going to do?"

Grahame reached into his desk and pulled a letter from it. Bennet remembered then that Grahame had been reading a letter when first he met Lois' father.

"I'm afraid there isn't much I can do," Grahame said. "That's why I played tonight. You see it isn't a matter of fifteen thousand. It's now thirty. . . ."

"You mean . . . ?" Lois asked hesitantly.

"I lost more than I told you of, Lois," the old man said sadly.

"Sir," Bennet said. "Would you consider a loan from your future son-in-law, a favor?"

Bennet didn't even hear the answer. He was lost in the eyes of the girl by her father's side. They were telling him of all the wonders of love. . . .

THE END

★ WESTERN GUNMEN — JIM COURTRIGHT ★

By MILDRED MURDOCH

JIM COURTRIGHT was one of the many Westerners who in the last half of the nineteenth century were respected and feared for their flashing, deadly weapon-work. He was one of the greatest gunfighters of them all, but he died by a freak hit from a stray bullet. Though in the later part of his life he slipped down the scale, and became a racketeer, he spent many years as a soldier, a good scout, and a valuable peace officer.

Courtright was a soldier in the Civil War, then came to Texas as an army scout. He did an excellent job, due to his outstanding abilities, his wide knowledge of the frontier, his amazing skill with weapons, and his popularity with his fellows. When nearing thirty, he quit the Army and was appointed marshall of Fort Worth, Texas. Texas towns in the seventies knew little of law and order; six-shooters were worn by all, men settled their disputes by gun-fire, without recourse to the law, and a peace officer had his work cut out for him. It was an opportunity for Jim to display his courage and his uncanny skill with weapons. However, he soon got himself involved in the politics of the town, and having the misfortune to align himself with the losing side, found himself out of a job.

Then came an offer to police Lake Valley, a new mining camp as rip-roaring wild as the wooliest of the Kansas cow towns. Here he killed two ore thieves, and otherwise performed his duties with such efficiency that soon the "bad men" took themselves to more healthy surroundings. Then the mines played out and again Courtright was jobless.

Next he was offered the position of foreman on a ranch. His job was not mainly to administer the affairs of the cattle, but to rid the ranch of squatters and rustlers, who were at that time threatening the free range, and disputing the rights of the large landowners. The law sided with the nesters, but the cowmen felt that it was unjust and they foresaw ruin for themselves if they did not fight these interlopers. Right or wrong, Courtright had accepted a job with a cowman, and he set about the task of earning his money. He told the squatters to get out.

Two Frenchmen refused to move. Courtright and a companion rode up to them one day, and got into an argument which ended in gunplay and the death of the two squatters. There was enough squatter-sentiment in the country that the killings aroused a great deal of bitterness. Courtright decided to leave.

BUT it was 1884, and murder had begun to be public business, not just a matter between man and man. Telegraph wires hummed, and legal papers passed from one state to another. Courtright could not escape the consequences of his act by simply leaving the county, or even the state. He was arrested in Fort Worth.

In Fort Worth, he had many friends, however, and an outburst of indignation spread across the city. For some reason, the men guarding Courtright were careless enough to take him out of the jail to a restaurant for his meals. The third time the prisoner and his guards entered the eating place, they found it packed with Courtright's friends. Courtright, with a Colt in each hand, was escorted to the door, where he found his horse, saddled and ready to go. He went to South America.

He remained there for quite a while and then, knowing his West, returned to New Mexico and surrendered. The witnesses were scattered, and the jury did not know him; Jim Courtright was acquitted.

He drifted for a while after that, then landed back in Fort Worth. This man with the remarkable dexterity with guns, whose coolness, courage and intelligence had placed him high in men's esteem, hunted an outlet for his new restlessness. Gambling was everywhere in Fort Worth, in spite of ordinances against it. Courtright set up a racket, under which he forced the gamblers to pay him to keep quiet about their activities. It paid him well, for all feared his marked ability as a gunfighter, and could not refuse his demands.

All except Luke Short, who invited him to jump in the river. Short was an expert desperado, who was doing well with his saloon in Fort Worth. He absolutely refused to pay Courtright a cent. Jim had to make good his demands, or lose everything and be laughed out of town.

He got himself quite drunk one night—it was February, 1887—and went looking for the stubborn gambler. He found him, and the conversation became heated. Courtright accused Short of reaching for his gun, which accusation brought about that very action. Short's gun spoke, just as Courtright's hand jerked his own gun into the air.

Short's aim was wild and would have missed Courtright, except for that upward movement of the gun hand. Short's bullet crashed into the hammer thumb of Courtright's hand just as it was pulling the trigger! Courtright, not wasting time reaching for his left-hand gun, threw his pistol from the right hand to the left. But in that second of time, Short sent three bullets at Courtright, not missing this time. So Jim Courtright died, victim of an extremely odd bit of gunplay, killed by a man who was not half the gunman he himself was.

THE CHINOOK WIND

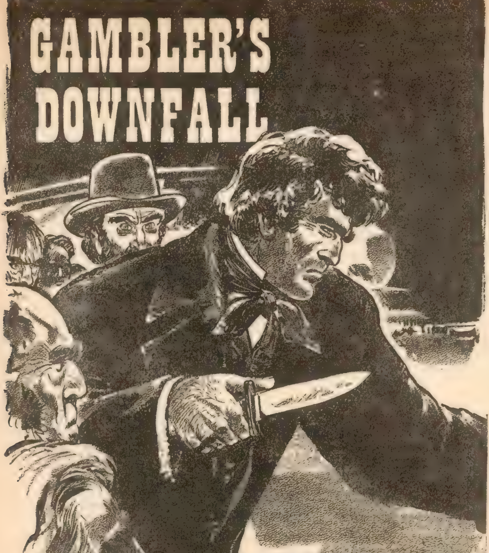
By PETE BOGGS

MANY herds of cattle on the northern ranges have been saved from death by the timely arrival of a Chinook wind. Perhaps the winter has been cold and snowy. Streams have frozen over; food lies beneath several feet of hard snow. Cattle will not paw through the snow to find food as horses do. Nor will they stay on the hills, where the layer of snow is thinner; instead, they are inclined to crowd into the valleys, which are the waterways, but where also the snowdrifts are deepest. Thus a hard winter is a dangerous thing for a herd of range cattle.

A rancher, during such a season, will sigh with relief when he notices that the mountain tops are beginning to look black and ominous. He knows that a Chinook is coming, to save his cattle from perishing in the snow. The Chinook Indians, tribes of the northwest, called it "the black wind," but the white men call it a Chinook. It is a strange current of warm air which blows in from the Japanese current of the Pacific and sweeps down the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains.

A violent wind blows, and suddenly the air is soft and springlike. The ice thaws, the snow disappears as if by magic. The cattle drink and feed and gain strength in this armistice which Nature has given them. Though winter will close in again, and with renewed fury, the Chinook has enabled the cattle to live through it.

GAMBLER'S DOWNFALL



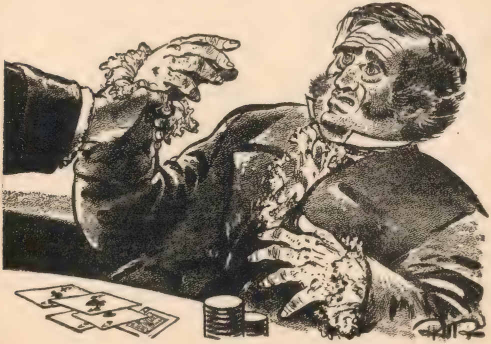
Bowie's hand shot across the table like a steel talon

by Leonard Finley Hilts

Lester Dwan almost lost his wife, his life and fifty thousand dollars—but it seems there was a sharp man with a knife, a Bowie knife . . .

THE ornate saloon of the *New Orleans* buzzed with excitement. The big river boat had been out of the wharf at Louisville only a few hours when all of the men in the saloon began to realize that something big was going on. A dozen little card games had started at the tables and the bar was lined with travellers. But the little games had long since folded, and the men at the bar had swung around on their stools.

In the middle of the saloon at a large round table a game had started almost as soon as the *New Orleans* had sounded her whistle in midstream off of Louisville. A young man in his early twenties, with black curly hair and a round pale face, sat at the table with three other men. Two of them were obviously wealthy plantation owners, and the third was expensively dressed



in the fashion of the city. All of them were completely oblivious of their surroundings, so intense was their interest in the game.

But the thing about that game that brought the attention of the whole saloon wasn't the players themselves. It was the fact that sometimes there was as much as ten thousand dollars on the table in one pot.

Perched on one of the bar stools morosely surveying the saloon was a tall, spare, somber-faced man. His attention, like that of everyone else, soon became riveted on the hot poker game in the center of the room. He watched the dealing of the cards through eyes narrowed to glinting slits. Slowly his lips drew into a thin tight line. He didn't like what he saw.

The man was dressed in black from head to foot. He wore a simply cut suit of black broadcloth, and a black broad-brimmed slouch hat sat carelessly on his head. He had the austere look of a travelling minister who tolerates the gambling and drinking on the river boats because it is the only way he can travel.

His face, however, showed little of the religious. The bones were sharply cut and angular, covered with deeply tanned, parchment-like skin. The eyes were shrewd and cavernous. It was the face of a man who spent a lot of time in the sun and open spaces. A few of those on the boat recognized him. The bartender nudged his assistant.

"That's Colonel Jim Bowie down there," he said, nodding in that direction. "If that game over yonder is crooked, you watch out. There'll be fireworks for sure. Bowie hates card cheaters."

The tense scene in the saloon continued for more than an hour, and the watchers soon saw that the heavy loser at the big table was the young, dark haired man. He poured money into the game recklessly, doubling up after each loss to try to recoup his previous losses. Estimates were whispered from man to man at the bar.

"He's lost forty thousand."

"Naw! It's fifty thousand if it's a nickel."

Finally the young man had a particularly bad streak of luck. He lost five big pots in a row. As the man from the city raked in the last, the young man stood up.

"Gentlemen," he announced solemnly, "I am undone."

His face turned ashen white as he spoke. He stood a minute, his eyes red and his lips moving nervously, then suddenly turned and rushed from the saloon. The men around the room observing this scene sat in stunned silence. The intense drama of it was overpowering. Few of them noticed the black, spectre-like figure that hurried from his place at the bar out to the deck after the young man.

BOWIE, once out on the deck, looked up and down hurriedly and saw that the young gambler had run toward the stern. He galloped after him, his long legs pumping hard. He had recognized the wild look in the young man's red rimmed eyes. He had seen it before. It was the look of a man who has lost everything, including his prestige, and can think of nothing but suicide.

The young man scaled the rail of the after deck and was ready to jump when Bowie stretched out a long arm and jerked him roughly back to the deck. Holding him by the collar, Bowie slapped his face fast and hard until the wild look left his eyes.

"Now, my young friend," he said in a soft deep voice that was like rich velvet, "tell me about it."

The young man was fighting to suppress hysterical sobs. "My name is Lester Dwan," he blurted brokenly, "and I'm from Natchez. I'm just going home after honeymooning in New York."

"You carry a lot of money just for a honeymoon," Bowie observed. "How much did you lose?"

"Fifty thousand. And it wasn't my money. I collected on some bills owed to five or six planters around Natchez while I was there, and the money I lost belonged to them. I thought maybe I could use their money to back me in a game to win some for myself. I . . .I didn't expect . . . to lose."

"You didn't!" Colonel Jim gasped. "With those sharks after you!"

"Sharks!" Dwan exclaimed. "Mr. Clinton is a well-to-do merchant from New Orleans, and Mr. Briarley owns a plantation outside of Vicksburg. Mr. Mandeville has a big place down the river somewhere too."

Bowie grinned. "If they own plantations, they bought them with money they took from young men like yourself who fancy themselves to be card players. Where's your bride?"

"Waiting for me in our cabin."

"All right. You're going to the cabin and tell her just what's happened since we left Louisville. Make a clean breast of the whole business. She'll respect you the more for it. And I'm going back to take care of Clinton, Briarley, and Mandeville."

They were still talking about the big poker game in the saloon when Bowie stepped back in and wandered up to the bar. The three gamblers themselves were at the bar, celebrating their recent victory with chilled bottles of vintage champagne. Bowie moved along the bar until he could step in close to where they were sitting. Then he drew out his wallet.

"Bartender," he said in a loud voice, "can you change a hundred-dollar bill for me?"

He opened his wallet wide and displayed a fat wad of bills, all of them apparently hundred-dollar bills. "I have nothing smaller with me," he complained.

The bartender looked goggle-eyed at the money and then obligingly found change in smaller bills for the one Bowie had handed him. The three gamblers sat, faces frozen in their victory smiles and champagne glasses suspended midway between the bar and their lips, while the exchange of bills took place.

Money! Hundred-dollar bills! Fat wallet! All he had!

NO WORDS passed between them, but suddenly they went to work as if the operation had been planned. Mr. Clinton, sitting farthest away from Bowie, flagged the bartender and pointed to their champagne bottles.

"Put those away for us," he commanded. "We'll probably need them later."

Mr. Mandeville and Mr. Briarley immediately engaged Bowie in conversation. They used up their supply of small talk inside of two minutes.

Then Mr. Mandeville said, "My, but these boat trips are dull. How about a game of cards to pass the time?"

"Fine," agreed Mr. Briarley. "How about you, sir?" he asked, addressing Bowie.

"Why, yes, I'd like to play," Bowie answered in a doubtful voice. "Of course, I like interesting stakes. No sense in playing for nothing. Is that all right with you?"

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Mr. Clinton, joining the group. "We like 'em big too. Can't stand a small game. No interest in it at all. Plenty of money keeps the game exciting.

The four men left the bar and went back to the round table in the middle of the room. A new deck of cards appeared from somewhere and the game began.

"Harry," the bartender said to his assistant, "keep that champagne cold. You and I'll drink it later. Those fellows won't need it. And take the good bottles of liquor down off of the back bar. They're apt to get broken when the fun starts."

The game started with several hundred dollars in each pot. Bowie seemed to have incredible luck with his cards, winning the first six pots with no effort at all. The other men laughed and declared that their lucky streaks had run themselves out.

Bowie lost two and then won two more. The other three men began to raise the stakes.

"I'll raise you out of necessity, sir," Clinton said to Bowie on one hand. "I'm way behind now and the pots have to be bigger if I'm to break even."

The pots began to grow like sprouts in the spring. First a thousand, then two, then three on the table at one time. And as the pots expanded Bowie's luck changed. The gamblers, with the smell of bigger money at the table, and with the sucker well primed with a few winning hands, had begun to bear down. Bowie lost his winnings, then began to dig into his wallet for more of the cold, solid cash.

After an hour Bowie was eight thousand in the hole. Then he picked up a hand that really looked good. Four natural kings and a ten spot. But it didn't fool him. He recognized the set-up. This was the hand that was made for the killing. He pulled his cards in close to his vest and started betting heavily.

The money began to stack up on the table. Mr. Clinton dropped out after two raises, and Mr. Briarley quit on the fourth. Mr. Mandeville and Bowie faced each other across the table.

Each man snapped out his raise as if he dared the other to meet it and stay. They were going up five thousand at a clip. The money piled up until the table looked like the counting room in a bank. Fifty thousand, sixty thousand, seventy thousand, eighty thousand, ninety thousand.

The saloon was breathlessly silent. The words of the two bettors echoed in the room and sent a thrill down the spines of all who heard them. Here were two fearless gamblers fighting it out all the way. No one dared to move an inch.

BOWIE kept his eyes on the man across from him, watching him carefully. He knew what to look for, and it was just a question of time until he saw it. And finally it happened. Mandeville's hand flicked, in a motion that was almost too fast for the human eye to see, to the sleeve of his coat. If he hadn't been watching for just such a move, Bowie would never have known that it happened.

In a sudden, lightning-like movement, Bowie jumped to his feet and whipped out a knife from the bosom of his shirt. The knife was one of those later to become famous as the bowie knife, named after the man who had designed them.

"Show your hand Mandeville!" he commanded. "And I'll cut your liver out if it has more than five cards in it!"

Mandeville rocked back in his chair, stunned by the swiftness of Bowie's move. But he made no effort to lay down his cards. Bowie's hand shot across the table and grasped the gambler's wrist in a steel grip.

"Drop them, I said!" Bowie growled. He began twisting the wrist until Mandeville, with a cry of pain, threw his hand to the table. Bowie released him.

There was Mandeville's hand, exposed for all in the room to see. Four aces, a queen and a jack.

Bowie looked around the room, making sure everyone got a look at the hand.

"I'll take the pot," he said after a moment, "with a legitimate poker hand of four kings and a ten."

A shout went up from the spectators. Bowie was right. None of the gamblers dared to make a move in the face of this opposition. Sweeping off his slouch hat, Bowie swept the ninety thousand dollars into it, and then clapped the hat back on his head with a flourish.

"Now, you three," he ordered, "get off of this boat before it's too late."

Mandeville had recovered from his surprise and chagrin by this time. His eyes were blazing angrily. He pushed his chair back and got to his feet belligerently.

"Just who do you think you are?" he demanded. "No man can order me around like that!"

"I'm James Bowie!"

An excited buzz went through the saloon. Everyone knew who James Bowie was. Inventor of the bowie knife; rumored to have been associated with Jean Lafitte, the gulf pirate; known to be one of the most deadly duelists of the decade; a hunter and fighter of dangerous proportions. And everyone had heard, too, that Bowie frequently travelled the river boats, ferreting out cheating gamblers because he hated cheaters and loved taking their spoils from them.

They didn't know that this James Bowie was scheduled in four years to become one of his country's foremost heroes, when he died fighting alongside of Davy Crockett in the defense of the Alamo in 1836.

HEARING the famous name, Mandeville wilted, and he and his two partners faded out of the saloon like three whipped dogs, with their tails between their legs. Without another word Bowie left the saloon just after they did, and went in search of the cabin of the newlyweds.

"Well, Dwan," Bowie asked, "do you think you've learned your lesson thoroughly?"

"He certainly has," his pretty little wife answered quickly.

Dwan simply nodded, his face a picture of misery. "How am I going to face those planters when we get back to Natchez?" he asked disconsolately. "I have no money of my own."

Bowie took off his slouch hat and turned it crown up on a table. "I went to considerable trouble," he said, "to get this money back for you. It would be foolish to hand it over unless I was sure you had learned some good sense. Are you sure you're cured of the gambling habit?"

Dwan didn't answer in words, but his face was expressive enough a reply for Bowie. He would have wagered at that moment that Dwan would never touch a card again as long as he lived —or died.

"All right, Dwan," he said. "I guess you've learned. Here's the fifty thousand."

He passed over a sheaf of bills.

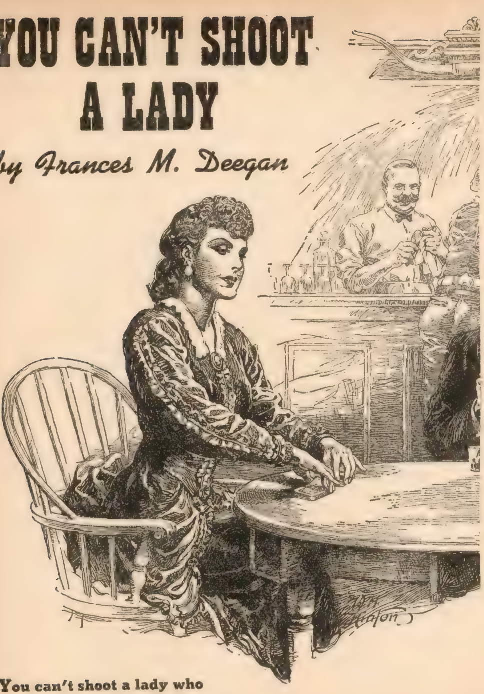
"And here's a wedding present from James Bowie. Ten thousand dollars to keep you out of trouble. The rest of this is my commission."

Before the young couple could recover enough from their surprise to thank him, the black coated, mysterious figure of Bowie had melted from their cabin. Although they looked, they didn't see him again on that trip.

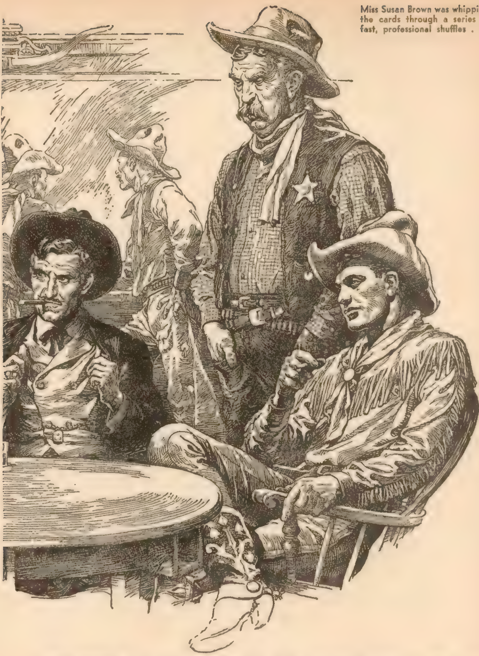
The reason they couldn't find him was that he went ashore at the *New Orleans'* next stop, to wait for another boat coming upstream. They could have found him in the saloon of the *Belle of Natchez,* perched on a bar stool, morosely watching the card games in progress around the room.

YOU CAN'T SHOOT A LADY

by Frances M. Deegan



You can't shoot a lady who handles a deck so delicately . . .



Miss Susan Brown was whipping the cards through a series of fast, professional shuffles . . .

THERE were six men at the bar when Martin Magee walked into the Athenium Palace. Three of them passed him going out. The other three stayed there, facing him as he came on. The young rage in his face was unconcealed and his big, lanky frame was visibly shaken with the fury boiling in him.

In contrast, the three older men seemed calm, almost indifferent. The lean, dark face of Parson Brown was the cold mask of the gambler, who watched other men lose, whether the play was made with cards or guns. The nickname suited the sober clothes, but not the face. The second man was big Cord Connel, owner of the Double-C, rock-like in build, with craggy features graven by a ruthless determination. The third was short, burly Hack Gaines, Sheriff by virtue of his tough survival of all opposition, legal and illegal.

"You're not gettin' away with this, Brown!" Martin's voice was hoarse with the effort to steady it. "It was bad enough—you killin' Tom, but you're not gettin' the ranch—"

"Hold it, son!" growled Hack Gaines. "You got no cause to get hot-headed about this. Your brother was killed in a fair fight. An' if he was fool enough to put up the ranch as collateral, an' then go ahead an' lose it over the card table—well, that's just his hard luck. You can't claim he didn't know what he was doin'."

"Time you shoulda stepped in," said Connel coldly, "was before he lost it. Not come cryin' around after it's all over."

"It ain't over! I'm tellin' you—yes, you, damn you! I know what you're up to, sidin' with Brown! Sure, so you can buy up the Circle-M cheap. That's what you been after all along! An' if you think I'm gonna stand for it—"

"Hold it, son!" said Gaines again. "This here thing ain't no feud, an' it ain't gonna be. Now, I'm tellin' *you.* I don't blame you for rantin' around over losin' your dad's ranch. Fact is, we was just talkin' about you before you come bustin' in here with blood in your eye. The Parson even went so far as to say he'd be willin' for you to stay on at the ranch an' run it on shares, same as you done with Tom."

"Share hell! With Tom dead, the place is mine!"

"Not so long as I hold the deed to the ranch house, it ain't," said the Parson tonelessly. "But half the herd is yours. That's how your dad left it, and I'm willing it should stay that way, if you want to be sensible about it."

"Why, you dirty four-flusher! You mean you want me to stay on and hold the spread together just long enough for Cord Connel to take over—"

"Cool down, Magee!" advised Connel harshly. "You're young an' hot-headed, like the Sheriff says. You ain't learned to use no judgment. If you had, you'd know damn right well the Parson's makin' you a fair offer. Where the hell are you gonna go with your half a herd, if you don't stay on at the ranch?"

"You think it over, son," said Gaines, and nodded at his two companions. They both started toward the door. "You got a tough break, an' nobody's tryin' to deny it. But you cut loose an' do somethin' foolish, an' you're gonna lose out all around. Ain't nobody gonna side with you if you go against the law. Think it over."

Martin watched the Sheriff's broad back pass through the swing doors, his eyes bitter with frustration and a kind of sick shame. Knowing that his gun couldn't solve the problem, and yet hating himself for not using it to blast the whole mess to hell.

BEHIND the bar fat Charley Hogan picked up a bottle and a glass and walked heavily to where Martin was leaning, still watching the door. He poured the glass full to the brim and set the bottle down on the bar.

"Stage oughta be due now most any time," he said gruffly.

"What's the matter?" snapped Martin. "You scared I'll drive your customers away?"

"Nope. Just makin' conversation. You don't need to be so damn touchy. I ain't one to give a man advice, 'less he should ask for it."

"I ain't askin'."

"So I notice. Anybody should want my opinion, though, I'd say it pays to hang onto what you got. 'Specially when things is tough, because you never know what's gonna turn up. No sir, you just never know— Whoops! There she comes now, right on the dot! That Cal Cook is a heller, all right. Best stage driver this side of Omaha, but he's crazy for speed. Drink up, kid. I gotta set 'em up for the through passengers."

Martin shifted his bitter glance to the brimming glass. He didn't want it. He had never liked the stuff, but now he picked up the glass and drank it down defiantly. Instead of goading him to further fury, however, it had the opposite effect. The warming spirits spread through him, soothing his raw nerves, and quieting the devil of destruction. He closed his eyes and felt the taut muscles of his face relaxing, and suddenly he was deadly tired from the hours of strain and tension.

When he opened his eyes again he saw a vision in a pert blue bonnet and gray travel suit. She had big black eyes and a half open mouth, and she smiled straight at him.

"God bless you," she said sweetly. "Have you seen my father?"

Martin stared at her in weary disbelief.

"Good day, Ma'am," said Charley. "Who might you be lookin' for?"

"My father, the missionary," she said. "The driver thought I'd find him here."

"I ain't seen him. Not yet. You're the first in from the stage."

"No, no. Don't you understand?" she laughed delightedly. "He's here! Parson Brown, my father. I'm Susan Brown and I've come to help him run the mission."

Charley set down a glass too suddenly. The sound was as sharp as a gunshot. His eyes were popping out of his beefy face as if somebody had fired a shot at him.

"Run the—run the what?" he stuttered.

"Oh, my goodness! Didn't you ever hear of a lady missionary? Didn't you?"

"Yes, Ma'am, but— Look, Ma'am, does the Parson know— I mean, was your papa expectin' you?"

"No!" she trilled happily. "That's the best part, don't you see? It's a big surprise!"

"Uh-huh," said Charley glumly. "That's what I thought. I don't know—"

"That's all right, sir. You mustn't be embarrassed. I realize that the saloonkeeper and the parson may not always be the best of friends. I didn't really expect you to know where he is, but perhaps this gentleman—"

"No! Don't—" blurted Charley. "I mean, excuse me, Ma'am, but you better not bother him. He ain't feelin' well. He don't know nothin' about your father."

"The hell I don't!" said Martin harshly.

"Quit your cussin', dammit!" roared Charley, as the doors burst open before a noisy trio of travelers, who were followed by the local crowd and usual hangers-on.

She stepped primly to Martin's side and looked up at him shyly. "I don't really mind your swearing at him," she said. "I can see that he is a rough man.

And I know that I shouldn't have come here. Will you please take me out, and help me find my father?"

THERE was a sudden hush as Charley got his message across to the noisy crowd, and all eyes were focussed on the blond, young giant and the tiny, black-eyed female appealing to him.

"Your father," said Martin, "is a dirty skunk. And I'll have nothin' to do with him."

"Oh, shame!" she whispered. "To hate a good man—"

"If he is good," said Martin harshly, "then every murderer is good, every thief and liar and double-dealing crook who ever—"

The doors swung open once more and Parson Brown walked in, followed by the bug-eyed stage driver. The Parson's long face was grim, and he walked with the deliberate stiffness of an angry dog.

"That will do, Magee!" he said tautly. "I've taken your abuse because you're not a full grown man. But when you turn it on my innocent harmless daughter—"

"Father!" cried Susan, but he waved her aside.

"Yes, gentlemen," said the Parson in ringing tones, but without taking his eyes off Martin. "This is my little daughter that I haven't seen for fifteen years. Is it any wonder that I have neglected my chosen profession to provide for her? She was raised in a good Christian home, and in all innocence she made the long trip to New Athens to be with her father. It was a mistake for her to come here, but is that any reason why she should take the abuse intended for me?"

There was an angry muttering in the crowd as the Sheriff and Cord Connel moved up behind the Parson, and Martin stood there with his head lowered like a baffled bull. He was choking with a rage that had no words to fight this grandstand play. He saw what was happening and he knew that he stood alone, that everybody else would play the Parson's game. They would pretend he was a real parson and had only turned renegade to support his little daughter. It was a combination he couldn't beat. Not with words. Once again they had managed to put him in the wrong.

Suddenly he was cold and sick with defeat, and a terrible loneliness. It almost seemed as if they were trying to make an outlaw of him. Egging him on to make a wrong move, so that one way or another they could take everything from him. Everything he had left.

Martin lifted his head and looked at the hostile faces, then he let his gaze drop to Susan Brown. She was pressed back against the bar looking more excited than scared, her black eyes darting from her strange father to Martin and back again.

"All right, Mister Brown," said Martin flatly. "I know what you're after, and I'll give you a sporting chance to get it. You already won the best part of the Circle-M with your cards. Now I'll put up my share. If I lose, then the whole spread is yours, and you don't have to bother tryin' to get rid of me any other way. If you lose, then I keep my share, and you sign over to your daughter the share you won from Tom—just before you shot him."

"What the devil are you talkin' about!" blustered Cord Connel angrily. "Why should he do a fool thing like that?"

"To provide for his daughter," said Martin wearily. "She can get a nice livin' off the ranch, and he won't have to worry no more about neglectin' his preachin' profession."

Somebody at the back of the crowd sniggered and the tension relaxed. The faces were eager now, and no longer hostile.

"You're crazy!" Connel shouted, red-faced. "He ain't gonna do no such a damn thing!"

"What are you gettin' so het up about?" demanded Martin. "Seems to me like I'm the one's bein' a fool. I'm the only one stands to lose anything. How about it, Mister Brown? Are you game?"

The Parson hesitated only an instant behind his blank mask. "I'll do it," he said tonelessly, his voice completely calm and controlled.

AN ELATED cheer went up from the crowd and glasses pounded the bar. Somebody bought for the house and Charley Hogan was kept hopping behind the bar while eager hands hauled the round poker table into the center of the room.

Martin stood coldly apart from the bustle, the sick defeat still with him. This was to be the end of it. He'd lose, just as Tom had lost, and then he'd pull his gun . . .

But at least this way he had a slim chance of plugging the Parson before they got him. They were bound to get him anyway, but if he could get the Parson first, he'd be satisfied. That was all he wanted, that brief moment when only he and the Parson knew for sure that he had been dealt a losing hand. But it seemed he wasn't even to have that.

Somebody urged him toward the table, and he was a little surprised when he got there to find three people already seated. The Parson sat there looking cold and grim, and behind him Cord Connel's red face seemed near bursting with anger. At the Parson's right the Sheriff was opening a new deck with a cocky air of authority, and across from him sat Miss Susan Brown, primly upright on the edge of her chair.

Instead of hanging on her father and making a fuss over him after all these years, she was staring at Martin with her red mouth pursed up tight, and her black eyes snapping with indignation. She looked mad as a wet hen. Like a school teacher getting ready to bawl out some kid for not knowing his geography lesson.

Martin dragged out the fourth chair and sat down, not too near the table, to give himself elbow room.

"All right, now," said Hack Gaines, and the noise quieted down. "Here's the way we're gonna do it. I don't want no ruckus, on account of any hard feelin's afterwards, so we're gonna keep it nice an' clean an' simple. The little lady here is gonna handle the cards, shuffle an' cut three times. Each of the gents will draw a top card. That's all. High card wins." He looked hard at Martin. "Ain't gonna be no ruckus afterwards. You can't shoot a lady." He reached across the table and slapped the new deck down in front of Susan Brown.

The old familiar sense of frustration possessed Martin. They were too smart for him. Always one jump ahead of him . . .

Somebody in the crowd whistled admiringly through his teeth, and Martin's attention came back to the table with a startled jump.

Miss Susan Brown was whipping those cards through a series of fancy shuffles like a lady magician. They obeyed her strong capable fingers like trained soldiers. They marched, wheeled, closed ranks and marched again in perfect alignment as she spread her hands, flipped an accurate wrist, and slapped them together again. She cut the cards—one, two, three—across the table, and looked at Martin sternly.

Bewildered, he stretched his left arm and fumbled the top card off the nearest stack. He held it face down in front of him and continued to stare at the three neat stacks lined across the table between him and the Parson.

The Parson's inscrutable mask was drawn tight. He seemed to be studying the backs of the cards with some inner vision. He took a long time while the room held its breath. At last he half rose in his chair to reach the middle stack in the center of the table. He sank back in his chair and flipped the card over. The deuce of hearts. The strangled sound came from behind him. His own face was rigidly unchanged, but the mask had turned gray.

MARTIN'S weary brain was spinning, trying to catch up with whatever it was that was happening. They were bound to get him, but this was too tricky for him to figure out. His right hand dropped below the table. Somebody shuffled his feet, and the Sheriff barked:

"Magee! Hands on the table, an' turn up your card!"

He sighed and brought his hand slowly back in sight. Somebody pressed against the back of his chair. If there ever had been a chance for him, it was gone now. Thanks to that damn black-eyed female! If she hadn't been there . . .

His gaze dropped to the card under his left hand. He turned it over and saw the queen of spades.

"Yahoo!" somebody yelled. "The black-eyed queen herself! Man, are you lucky!"

Hands slapped him on the back, friendly hands. Voices rose all around him, cheerful voices. Everybody was satisfied. All except Cord Connel and the tight-lipped Parson who was on his feet now, facing the other man's sputtering anger. Instead of answering, the Parson snaked a long arm to the third stack of cards and turned up the deuce of diamonds. He looked at his daughter coldly.

"Very nice," he said tonelessly. "Very nice indeed. I suppose you'll want cash money for the property you so artfully acquired?"

She lifted her chin and returned his gaze with equal coldness. "I'll want the papers," she said, "properly endorsed to me. I'll decide whether I want to sell or not after I've looked it over."

She stood up and gave her gray skirts a business-like shake. "Mr. Magee," she commanded, "will you kindly arrange to take me to the ranch at once? My luggage is at the express station."

Martin frowned at her and he frowned at the queen of spades in his hand. He got up awkwardly and said, "Ma'am?"

"Come along, Magee," Sheriff Gaines said. "You too, Ma'am. I'll go to the livery stable with you, an' see that you get a proper ve-hicle. Martin here has been a little upset lately, an' he ain't up on his manners. But you'll find he'll make a right smart ranch pardner, if you can keep him from flyin' off the handle."

Martin's horse was behaving like a balky colt. He didn't like being tethered to the back end of the livery rig. He fought it all the way, and did his darnedest to kick off the rear wheels. He was like to break a leg, but Martin was too distracted to worry about it and it didn't bother him.

There she was, this black-eyed female, riding out to the ranch with him bag and baggage. As far as he could see, she intended to settle right in and take over the ranch house. It was all

(Continued on page 182)

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(Continued from page 180)

very confusing.

She kept asking questions about this and that and the other thing. Woman's questions. They hadn't had a woman on the ranch since his mother died years ago. He didn't know how the boys were going to like it. He didn't know how he was going to like it himself.

"Maybe you won't like it," he said, when she had run out of questions. "It's kinda rough on a ranch. Not like what you been used to, livin' in the East."

"A good housekeeper can fix up a home anywhere," she retorted. "That's what I came out here for, to fix a home and keep house."

"Your pa—the Parson, he's like to be mad at you for—"

"He can stay mad for all of me," she said angrily. "The idea of him letting on all these years he was a hard working preacher! And the gall of him, standing up in front of everybody in that saloon and claiming he'd been supporting me!"

"Didn't he?"

"He did not! It was the other way around. Grandma Brown and me sending him money, every time he wrote one of his pitiful letters. After Grandma died, I decided I'd better come out here and look after him. You can thank Providence, Mr. Martin Magee, that I got here when I did. Of all the fool stunts—you gambling away your holdings like that. You were just asking for a trimming! Aren't you even grateful?"

"Uh-huh," said Martin doubtfully. "Only I didn't really figger to win. If it hadn't been for the Sheriff's idea—"

"Oh, my goodness! You *are* a dunce. It was all my idea. So I could handle the cards."

"Yeah," said Martin suddenly. "I noticed them cards. It was real slick, the way you—"

"Manipulated is the word you want. And why shouldn't I be clever at it? I learned the same place my father did. Grandma and Grandpa Brown were famous performers in their day, doing card tricks and juggling that nobody else has ever been able to equal."

"Well," said Martin, as the idea slowly took hold. "Well, I'll be danged! Then the Parson an' old Cord Connel sure enough will be mad at you—us. I don't like to scare you, but they shot my brother, an'—"

"You don't scare me the least little bit," she declared firmly. "I'm sorry about your brother, but he must have done something foolish, to get himself shot. This time you've got yourself a sensible partner, and I'll stand for no foolishness, so you'll be safe enough on that score. And the ranch will be safe too, as long as I'm the boss. You remember what the Sheriff said, don't you?"

"Yes, Ma'am," said Martin meekly. "You can't shoot a lady."

THE END

★ AMERICAN MUMMIES ★

By MARTY MESNER

LONG-AGO residents of the Southwest mummified their dead by the simple means of laying the bodies in the backs of the caves of the region. The thin, dry air very efficiently preserved the bodies.

Whereas the Egyptians prepared bodies for mummification by using preservatives and then winding the bodies round and round with cloth, the Indians left it all to Nature.

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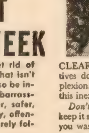

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Stop worrying and being embarrassed over what may happen to your skin. Just send for your Viderm Double Treatment this minute, and be confident that you will keep a smooth and clear complexion. Follow the simple directions, written by a doctor, that you will get with your Viderm Double Treatment; then look in your mirror and listen to your friends admire your smooth, clear skin—the kind that women go for.

Just mail your name and address to The New York Skin Laboratory, 206 Division Street, Dept. 446, New York City 2, New York. By return mail you will receive both of the Viderm formulas, complete with full directions, and packed in a safety-sealed carton. On delivery, pay two dollars plus postage. If you wish, you can save the postage fee by mailing the two dollars with your letter. Then, if you aren't thrilled with results, your money will be cheerfully refunded. Remember that both of the formulas you use have been fully tested and proven, and are reliable for you. If they don't help you, your treatments cost you nothing. After you have received your Viderm, if you have any questions to ask concerning abused skin, just send them in.

The READER RIDES The RANGE

We're continuing this old department, gang. So start shooting the stuff our way. We'll try to print as many letters as we can, and no matter what you say, we want to hear it—whether good, bad or indifferent!—Ed.

GIVE INDIANS CITIZENSHIP?

Sirs:

As one who has lived almost seventy of his eighty-five years west of the Missouri River, and has known and enjoyed the friendship of members of every Indian tribe west of the Big Muddy, my thanks to MAMMOTH WESTERN for its splendid work in calling attention to the plight of the Navajos. I join with you in your demand for conferring citizenship on the Indians.

I challenge any man to successfully contradict the statement that Indians never broke a treaty with the whites and that the whites never kept one. The so-called Battle of Wounded Knee, South Dakota was not a battle but a premeditated massacre of starving peaceful Indians indulging in a religious dance as a prayer for relief. I was a newspaper correspondent with a Nebraska militia regiment stationed within thirty miles of the Pine Ridge agency and know whereof I speak. The American Indian has never had his rights, but he has plenty of wrongs. Fraternally, Will M. Maupin, The Gripe, Clay Center, Nebraska.

You're not alone Mr. Maupin, in plugging for citizenship rights for the Indians, but we're glad that you voiced your sentiments. There are a lot of people in this country that feel the same way as you. If you've watched Mammoth Western closely, you've noticed that we've always been in there, pitching for the American Indian. Incidentally we've heard others make the same comment on the "so-called Battle of Wounded Knee." What do you think of the results of our plea for the Navaho? The response on a national scale has been pretty terrific, eh?—Ed.

AUTHENTIC COSTUMES!

Sirs:

You published a piece in October, 1947, MAMMOTH WESTERN by Albert Swanson, "The New West," page 185.

He had better get around and look up where and what the cowboy wore.

I can go back 55 years when the 10 gallon Stetson was worn. It was taken from the Mexican Hat by Stetson and boys then were wearing jeans.

If they were doing much roping they used leather pants and leather chaps to keep from tearing their clothes and getting hurt. They dressed that way in Texas. In the North they used Angora chaps in the winter because they were warmer.

Go back to Miller Brothers 101 Ranch, Colonel Mulhall's Ranch at Mulhall, Oklahoma, Colonel Cody. They were all old when moving pictures started and they and all their cowboys wore 10 gallon hats and leather bat-wing chaps.

I have worn a Stetson 10 gallon hat for over 40 years.

So I think he should get around and find out things before he writes about them.

Hollywood would have never endorsed and dramatized the 10 gallon hat and bat-wing chaps as they were used long before pictures.—Charles L. Allen, 123 24th Avenue, Seattle 22, Washington.

Apparently you know your business, Mr. Allen, because those are some interesting facts, but there is probably a difference of opinion between you and Mr. Swanson mainly due to regional differences. We don't think that it's possible to be absolutely specific on every item. There'll be more material on cowboy dress in future issues. We think it's an interesting subject—agreed?—Ed.

INTERESTING EXPERIENCES . . .

Sirs:

I was intensely interested in your Fire Trail yarn. I have been interested in the Navahos for some time and wrote to Red Fox Senior in New York for some authentic data which I could quote in an appeal for funds to help them.

Your letter which came my way quite by accident is all I need and with the yarn, etc.

I have walked these spirit paths since I was six. Others who walk sometimes visit me. I need no hypnotic "ceremony" to start me off as it seems I go only when "fetched" or "called." Once I nearly

(Continued on page 186)

Do Unseen Powers
Direct Our Lives?

ARE the tales of strange human powers false? Can the mysterious feats performed by the mystics of the Orient be explained away as only illusions? Is there an intangible bond with the universe beyond which draws mankind on? Does a mighty Cosmic intelligence from the reaches of space ebb and flow through the deep recesses of the mind, forming a river of wisdom which can carry men and women to the heights of personal achievement?

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Address..

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THE READER RIDES THE RANGE

(Continued from page 184)

got buried while I was "away." However, last month I visited the Maya somewhere in a "brave new world" ruled by an ancient Christ "Isadore"—so anyone who is worried about "Atoms" can console themselves that at least a "few" will be saved to carry on somewhere as has always been the case after every world "Flood," Fire or Great Rain or Ice Age. We are immortal—even this "flash" which Oge Make saw on the Television screen could only have destroyed the material of Planet One, in fact it actually destroyed nothing but merely changed it as all matter is changing all the time.

Could you please send me L. Taylor Hansen's address.

Why is there a tail on the Peace Pipe (p. 145) instead of feathers? Do the Navahos use tails? Also where are the "ceremonial Blankets"?—Sincerely, Kathleen Casler, Smithers, B.C., Canada.

Your letter, Kathleen is one of the many we've received on the almost occult nature of the "Oge Make" story. If you've followed our sister magazines, Fantastic Adventures *and* Amazing Stories, *you've probably seen mention of similar things. Unfortunately Mr. Hansen's address is changing so rapidly that we can't give it to you right now. The tail on the peace pipe instead of the feather was simply artistic liberty. The ceremonial blanket wasn't depicted.—Ed.*

HE WANTS A NEW DEPARTMENT

Sirs:

I have a gripe to make against your magazine. I like MAMMOTH WESTERN in general, but I think you should have more stuff on guns. Why don't you open a department on the types of rifles and pistols used out west and their origin? I think that would make interesting reading. My dad had a Navy Colt .44 that he used to use for target practice, and the stories he told about it used to keep me awake.

Still, I must say that I like your Hopson stories. William Hopson must be a real westerner. I like all the detail he brings into his stories. Where does he get it?

Keep up the good work and I'll plunk my quarter down for MAMMOTH WESTERN anytime. I hope that you print this.—John Sauer, 4809 N. Fairfield, Chicago, Ill.

Glad you like the magazine, John. MAMMOTH WESTERN *tries its best. Yes, Hopson is a real westerner and he gets his authentic stuff by living it. We like the idea of a gun department except for one thing. There is so much material available on the history of guns that it would almost be simply repeating things for us to print more about them. But we'll keep the idea in mind. Who knows? Keep reading MW, John, and you'll get more than your quarter's worth.—Ed.*

IT ISN'T THAT BAD!

Sirs:

In your March edition of Mammoth Western I note an article by Mildred Murdoch about Sitting Bull.

I can not imagine where she got the story. There is no truth in it. I lived alongside the Sioux Reservation many years. And have been among them quite a bit. I first saw Sitting Bull in the summer of 1889.

I would like to write you an article about Sitting Bull and tell his true history. I have read so many articles in various magazines (not one of which was true) that I am disgusted, and not one of them written with any knowledge of the subject.—Yours sincerely, O. L. Bales, Jerome, Idaho.

We're glad that you bring up this matter concerning the truth and accuracy of articles that we run, Mr. Bales. In fact, you've probably noticed that we discussed the matter in our editorial (and praised ourselves). Perhaps we should have been a little more careful. The trouble is, that there is an answer to all this. So much has been written about the West and western figures that it is pretty hard to filter the truth from pure fancy. If you read one account about say, the Little Big Horn, you can read ten thousand and no two of them will be alike. In fact, it wasn't until quite recently that anyone was really aware of what went on there, nor was the truth known about Custer. So give us a chance, will you, Mr. Bales? We're only human and it's as tough a problem for us as for you. And all the time we're trying to filter the true from the false.—Ed.

WESTERNS ARE FOR ANY AGE!

Sirs:

I am sure you would never think an old woman far past the three score and ten mark would care for western stories,—but I *am* and *I do*. The first western publication I ever remember seeing, I bought it. That was more years ago than I like to remember. I've been buying and reading them ever since.

I have just finished reading "The Last of the Tinhorns," by William Hopson in the April '48 MAMMOTH WESTERN. I think it is one of the best stories I have ever read. Give us more of his stories.

I have written quite a few successful Western stories (or so I considered them). Don't know about the readers. My mind is not so brilliant and so deep as Hopson's.

Of all modern literature I like Western stories best, my age and sex notwithstanding, and MAMMOTH is my favorite. Keep up the good work.—Mrs. Cora O'Neill Kendall, East Calhoun Street, Magnolia, Ark.

It's a pleasure to know you feel about MW as strongly and as favorably as you do. Hopson is one of our best writers as the numerous letters testify. And you needn't apologize for your age, sex, or interest in western stories. People with all sorts of interests and occupations, like them—especially cowboys. You're in good company, Mrs. Kendall. Stick with us and you will see a lot more of Hopson as well as other top-notchers in the field. Thanks for the nice things.—Ed.

HINTON IS TOPS HERE!

Sirs:

I don't usually read pulp magazines, but I was attracted by Mr. Hinton's cover on your MAMMOTH WESTERN and decided to buy one. I wish to tell you that I find your fact articles of great interest and very accurate.

I admire Mr. Hinton's painting very much. Being an artist myself, I can truly appreciate his fine work. Congratulations to him!

I would like to know how many back numbers you have available showing Indian life on the back covers. If possible I would like to obtain them and would be glad to send a money order as soon as your answer arrives.

Please continue your good work, especially your fine fact articles.

Thanking you in advance for your kind consideration and wishing you continued success, sincerely, Vincent R. Mercaldo, Western Historic Photographs, 104-42 104th St., Ozone Park 16, New York.

Them's nice words, pard! Thanks a lot. We're glad you think so highly of MW. You can't always tell, can you? There's a lot of first rate reading in pulp magazines as you've found out. We too, think Hinton is terrific. As for back copies, we suggest you write our subscription department—we're sure you'll get satisfaction. Stick with us, Mr. Mercaldo; we're going to deliver the goods, fiction and fact!

NAVAJO TABOO

By MILDRED MURDOCH

Sacred are the ruins of death!

THE Navajos, being a pastoral people, do not have permanent homes, but live in unstable huts made of logs and brush chinked with mud. Moving from place to place as they do, they build new houses, or hogans, wherever they go, and they stick to the customs and beliefs of their fathers about these buildings.

When a Navajo dies in a house, that house is never used again by the Indians. The relatives of the dead person smash part of the house, and there it stands till it falls into ruins, as a sacred monument to the dead.

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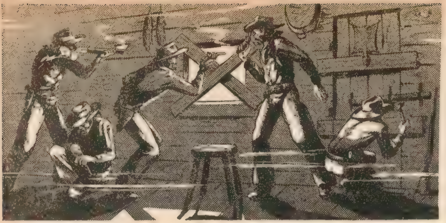

WAR IN WYOMING

By CHARLES RECOUR

Law came to the West eventually, but before it did—oh, man!

ON ONE side were the big cattlemen, the owners of the large ranches, the men who had gotten there first. Opposed to them were the small stockmen, the "little" man, and a great many rustlers. They met in open conflict, in a war which was ludicrous, senseless, and settled nothing.

It was the spring of 1892. Tension between the two factions had been growing by leaps and bounds. There had been lynchings, mysterious killings, bold rustling operations, and defiance by the rustlers of the rules for branding and marketing laid down by the Wyoming Stockgrowers Association, whose members were big cattlemen, with headquarters at Cheyenne.

Johnson County, base for the small owners, had formed its own stock association. It even elected its own sheriff, so strong was the faction in that county, and the cattlemen had no voice there. The small men made plans to hold their own roundup that spring, with no regard to any prior claims to mavericks, range or water.

Some of the "small owner" faction were actually ranchers, newcomers trying to get established and bitterly resenting the entrenched position of the wealthy ranchers who claimed the best water supplies and vast areas of land, with little right to do so except that they had gotten there first. More of this faction were rustlers, some of them out-and-out thieves, but many of them were cowhands and others who thought they were justified in obstructing the rule of the barons in any way possible. Local sympathy was with the rustlers and against the wealthy cattlemen, many of whom spent most of their time in the East or abroad.

That spring of 1892 a number of the large cattlemen met in Cheyenne, and decided to invade Johnson County, and kill or drive out of the country the most active of the rustlers, the names of whom they had listed. They hired about twenty expert Texas cowpunchers, and there were about thirty of the ranchers. Except for the hired Texans, they were quite unfit for the expedition they were undertaking. Most of them were college men, travelled and cultured, and used to being obeyed. Though they were brave and determined, they were greatly outnumbered by the opposition, who were rough, tough men experienced in the kind of fighting which was coming.

The invaders loaded a complete outfit upon a train. There were plenty of good horses, and equipment for comfortable camping. They went by rail to the little town of Casper, Wyoming, and then disembarked, and set out by horseback, their destination being the town of Buffalo, stronghold of the rustlers. But they ran into difficulties, and never arrived at Buffalo.

Their first objective was the K C ranch, located between Casper and Buffalo. The principal rustlers wanted were two men named Champion and Ray, who were known to make their headquarters at the K C. The invaders surrounded the ranchhouse at daybreak one morning. Two freighters, who happened to have spent the night there, came out of the house and were quietly taken prisoner. Then Ray came out of the door with a bucket which he intended to fill with water. Several rifles spoke, and Ray fell.

Champion then realized his position, and remained out of sight in the house, firing at the besiegers now and then. This lasted all day. Then the raiders fired a load of hay and pushed it against the house, setting the building on fire. Champion was finally forced, by the heat and smoke, to leave the house. He made a dash for a nearby gully, and was shot by a dozen rifles as he ran. His body was left lying there, with a sign on it reading "Cattle Thieves Beware."

During the day of the siege of the K C ranch, some men came along in a wagon, saw what was going on, and escaped with the news. By nightfall three hundred Johnson County men were riding, an army aroused to fury and ready to fight.

The raiders, realizing that the news of their coming was out, hurried on into hostile country, anxious to get about their business of killing or driving out rustlers. In their haste, they pushed on ahead of their wagons. These were soon seized by the rustlers—and the invaders were left without food or supplies. They ceased being the pursuers, and became the pursued.

They stopped at the T A ranch, and realizing the danger of their position, prepared for a siege, barricading the buildings, making rifle stands and firing pits. The rustlers soon had them surrounded. The forces of the rustlers and their sympathizers were constantly being augmented, and they were determined to kill or capture all of the invaders. Their leader was the sheriff of Johnson County. Firing went on intermittently, and though one or two men were injured, there were no casualties.

A strange aspect of the affair is that the combat was publicized in detail, and the entire civilized world knew what was going on from day to day. Of course, the bulletins from Buffalo contradicted the bulletins coming from Cheyenne. All of Wyoming was in an uproar of excitement.

Fort McKinney was not far from the T A ranch. The sheriff asked the commander of the Fort to assist him in capturing the cattlemen. The commander refused to do this. The acting governor of the state sent a telegram to Washington, and orders came to Fort McKinney to end the disturbance, but without delivering any prisoners from one faction to the opposing faction.

By this time the siege had continued for three days. Finally, then, from Fort McKinney came a troop of cavalry, which demanded the surrender of the cattlemen to the United States forces. The cattlemen were only too glad to comply, after being assured that they would not be turned over to the Buffalo authorities, which would have meant certain death. There was talk among the rustlers of taking the invaders from the troops by force, but nothing was done, although there was much bitterness among the rustlers that their prey had been snatched from them.

The raiders, weary and bedraggled, were removed to safety a hundred miles from the scene of battle. They were then turned over to the civil authorities in Laramie, and they obtained a change of venue to Cheyenne, where they would be among friends. They were kept in nominal custody for three months, each charged with the murder of Champion and Ray, and under total bail amounting into the millions. The Texans left the country, jumping their bonds, probably under advice of counsel.

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THE OLD ARMY

By JOHN WESTON

DURING the recent war it was very popular to say to the recruits "it was never like this in the *old* army," even though it was. Of all the innumerable institutions that man has created on Earth, probably few are more unchanging than the armies. This holds for the armies of every country in the world. The ancient Babylonians probably knew of "bunk fatigue," too!

The history of the American West is intimately associated with the Army. While the army wasn't the primary settling force in western affairs, there is no question that it offered, after the dreadful and tragic years of the War Between the States, protection to the hundreds of thousands who poured indiscriminately onto the Great Plains.

Army encampments of the period were not greatly different from the ones now. The same technical terms were used. A supply room then, was no different than "supply" now. Ranks varied somewhat but in general were much the same.

But because the army was above all mobile, in order to combat the fast-moving Shawnees, Piutes, Apaches and a hundred other tribes, the prime development was of the cavalry.

A typical post or fort of the period 1870 to 1890, was the usual stone or wooden stockade, surrounding groups of barracks, stables, supply offices and storerooms. Often one section of the fort—if it was located where women could be brought safely—was devoted to homes for officers and their wives. As a rule, enlisted men were barracked—and that's all. If activity was slight along the frontier—and this was not too common—the men would find plenty to do in laying out lavish establishments.

It was the custom to have frequent social events for both enlisted men and officers, usually in the form of dances. The settlers and townspeople were a part of the social life in that their daughters were the equivalent of the "U.S.O." These dances would often be lavish, magnificent affairs, dependent upon the size of the Army post and the inclination of the commanding officer.

THE equivalent of the "PX" or personal supply store for the men, was the "sutler's office." Here all purchases of recreational materials, fancy uniform decorations, beer, tobacco, candy, etc., could be obtained. The sutler was a licensed merchant whose function was to provide the men with the little things that make living civilized. He was almost always a civilian.

From the above it must not be inferred that army life was something soft and delectable. Far from it! To begin with, discipline was incomparably harsher, and punishments were correspondingly more severe. This meant that a man had to be tough and rugged to take the life. It was common for martinets of officers and noncoms to ride their men with extreme and heartless severity without regard for their personal welfare. Of course there were always those who did not abuse this privilege of rank and who were consequently adored by their men.

The military life on the frontier, with the addition of discipline in many ways was reminiscent of a cowboy's life. The men sometimes were in the saddle for days at a time. They arose at fearfully early hours. Their pay was nothing to write home about, and they had to be able to withstand all kinds of weather. In spite of this rough and unappealing life there always seemed to be enough dare-devils who would be willing "to jine the U.S. Cavalry."

And but for the Army, it is entirely possible that it would have been impossible to build the transcontinental railroads, or even to open up the west. The Indian then was a fierce, brave, merciless opponent who exacted his toll in human lives for the Westward advance. "The Old Army" was something to be proud of—what a thrilling thing it must have been to hear the harsh notes of "Boots and Saddles" waft over the early morning parade ground, with the sun coming up with the Flag!

THE START OF RUSTLING

By HILARY COWEN

OFTEN times readers of western fiction ask the old question: "why are so many western stories about rustlers and rustling?" and "didn't anything happen in the Old West besides rustling?" and "weren't the fights between the Indians and the settlers and the U. S. Cavalry more important than rustling?" These are good questions and they require an answer. It is much like today when we know that business and economic troubles lie at the roots of most political troubles. Similarly, in the Old West, cattle raising being the basic business of the West, it was, in its way, more important than the Indian Wars.

After the War Between the States, the West started to open up in a big way. To begin with, the railroads were pushing their steel paths through wilderness penetrable previously only by horse. This meant that settlers and goods could go in while products could come out—products like copper ore, zinc ore, gold—and above all—cattle. In the process of building the railroads, the gigantic herds of buffalo that once roamed the plains, were slaughtered by the millions. This left monstrous areas of pasturages that could be used for grazing purposes. What was more logical than raising cattle? Immediately, huge ranches of hundreds of thousands of acres sprang up. On this vast, unfenced territory, that most valuable product of the West—cattle—went to feed the meat-hungry East. Fortunes were piled up, and men were building a new type of civilization. It was almost feudal in nature, where the land-owners

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were not really "owners" except by right of eminent domain. They managed their huge herds with the aid of the cowboy whose main function was to keep track of the cattle as well as to drive them to railheads where they could be sent East.

Where great wealth exists, as under these conditions, it is only natural that thievery is going to rear its ugly head. And so the herds of the owners, identified only by the branding mark, were raided by the small crook, the brand changed, or completely eradicated, a new brand marked, and then sold. Of course the owners took steps to prevent this by keeping vigilant watch on their "critters," by limited fencing and otherwise protecting themselves and their walking wealth.

AS THE thieves became bolder, they stole with greater intensity, and in short order range wars occurred on a large scale. Rustling was at its height. Many and bitter were the battles fought between the legitimate cowmen and the common rustler. What complicated the picture was the fact that not all owners were legal operators themselves. In addition the influx of squatters, homesteaders, small farmers and others who occasionally did a little minor rustling of their own, still further confused the picture. Consequently during the seventies, eighties and nineties, it was difficult to prevent rustling completely.

The ruthless warfare then between the rustler and the range-owner, in the absence of suitable law-enforcement, provided plenty of literary material for today. It is no wonder at all that cattle-wars are a favorite for writers who know the western field. And as long as western stories are written, the rustler will occupy a central stage.

There is a tendency today though to treat the West with greater consideration from an historical standpoint. For one thing, the military history of the Indian Wars provides lavish material for story-writers. In fact, so simple a subject as the every-day life of the cowboy offers loads of interesting material. MAMMOTH WESTERN has stressed this tendency. The arduous, dangerous, exhausting work of taking a herd of two or three thousand head of cattle to a railhead for Eastern shipment, can offer so much of interest that it is breath-taking. The picturesque figure of the cowboy engaged, not in a cattle-war, but simply in his every-day work, offers us a fascinating picture of the West at its best. The history of the United States with its terrific development, both industrial and agricultural, makes the most interesting story of all though the side-lights, the cattle-wars, the rustlers, the Indians, and the cowboy at work, all give us a sense of pride in our forefathers.

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Born in Indiana, he came to Texas when he was seventeen, and lived the hard life of a cowpuncher. Then he began to yearn for a little "easy money," and took to petty gambling, "rolling" drunks, even sticking up stage coaches now and then. He joined a gang who were planning a train robbery.

The six men, under the leadership of one Joel Collins, jumped a Union Pacific train when it stopped at a small station in Nebraska. The robbery had been carefully planned, and it proceeded without a hitch, until they came to the safe in the express car. Two hundred thousand dollars it contained, and could be opened only after it had reached Omaha. Sam Bass furiously wielded an axe upon it, but could not reach the treasure it contained. The men turned to other things. There was a pile of silver bricks, but they were too heavy to be moved. They then pounced upon a half dozen small wooden boxes, filled with gold pieces, ten thousand dollars worth to the box. While some of the men removed the boxes from the train, the others went through the coaches, relieving the passengers of their money and jewelry. The savage determination of the six cowboys so frightened both passengers and train crew that there was no resistance. Joel Collins ordered the engineer to take the train on its way.

The robbers excitedly picked up their loot, over ten thousand dollars apiece. They made a careful plan of action to avoid suspicion. First they hid their plunder on the banks of the South Platte River. Then they rode into the town of Ogallala and loafed around for a couple of days. They were experienced enough not to give themselves away by amateurish nervousness.

SAM BASS and Jack Davis headed for Texas. Sam was full of his plans for the future, of a gang with himself as leader, making many rich hauls by train robbery and other banditry. They didn't know that they had been trailed out of Ogallala, and their names and destinations discovered. Nebraska and Kansas were full of sheriffs and soldiers hunting for them. Collins and his partner were killed in a day or so, when they were detained by the soldiers and tried to shoot it out.

Bass and Davis exchanged their saddle horses for a horse and an ancient buggy, and they jogged quietly through Kansas, their feet resting on sacks of gold. On one occasion they were questioned by

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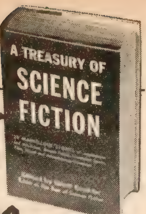

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a squad of soldiers, but professed to know nothing of the much-wanted Bass and Davis. They even camped that night near the troopers! They reached Fort Worth uneventfully, and here they parted, Davis heading for South America.

Sam talked largely around his home county of Denton about the money he had made, so he said, in mining stocks and horse racing. But he had never been a money maker, and the peace officers became suspicious, and soon discovered that Sam was one of the robbers wanted for the Union Pacific job. Large rewards were offered for his capture.

Sam learned to be cautious, but at the same time he persuaded several friends to join him in making up the "Sam Bass Gang." They robbed stages and trains, though never again did Sam have the luck to make a big haul. In fact the records show that in the seven months the gang operated, as his share Sam collected only a little more than five hundred dollars. Hardly worth the risks involved!

Posses, the Rangers, railroad detectives, United States marshals, sheriffs and deputies were all on the lookout for Sam Bass now. Some members of the gang were arrested, others deserted and cleared out of the country. Sam became fearful, suspicious of everyone. All this time he had never killed a man, avoiding opportunities, running from encounters with posses rather than shooting it out. Now his character changed and he became dangerous in his desperation.

Four of the gang, Bass, Barnes, Jackson and Murphy, decided to go to Mexico, robbing some bank on the way to obtain the money needed. Unknown to the other three, one of the number, Jim Murphy, was a traitor. He had been captured, then persuaded by Major Jones, Adjutant General of the State, to jump bond and return to Bass, so that he could inform the officers of the movements of the gang. Murphy sent word to the Rangers that it was planned to rob the bank in Round Rock.

THE town of Round Rock was swarming with soldiers and Rangers by the time the outlaws arrived. The gang camped outside of town and went in to look the situation over. Murphy made an excuse to separate from the others. In a store, a deputy sheriff named Grimes accosted the three robbers, accusing Bass of carrying a gun. Instantly, three six-shooters were drawn, and Grimes fell dead. Other officers, hearing the shots, came running, guns ready. Barnes was killed, and Bass seriously wounded. Somehow, Jackson got Bass into his saddle, and the two rode out of town in a hail of bullets. Bass knew he was done for, and persuaded Jackson to leave him under a tree and seek his own safety.

The Rangers found Bass the next morning, dying under an oak tree. He lived only a few hours more. It was July 21, 1878, his twenty-seventh birthday. —*Mack Maury*

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LIMPY'S GULCH (Novelette—22,000) .... by Don Wilcox 82

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Limpy favored his game leg a little, and with the help of the Indian girl, Wanda, he was doing all right—'til rustlers started to move in!

" . . . YOU CAME TO KILL" (Novelette—12,000) .... by Alexander Blade 120

Illustrated by Walter Haskell Hinton

He forgot a lot of things about the people he used to know, but when he got back to town, his memory was refreshed—with rawhide and gunsmoke!

THE DARK SIDE (Novelette—10,000) .... by Jack Colt 140

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No matter how you feel, when you're facing a man with a gun, you've got to have nerve, even though the chills are running up your spine.

THE LAUGHING BULL (Short—4,500) .... by Frances M. Deegan 160

Illustrated by Henry Sharp

You can push a nobody like Clem around for a while, anyhow, but he finally reaches a point where he takes nothing from nobody—not even . . .

PETTICOAT FORT (Short—4,500) .... by D. Francis 170

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When the Sioux are on the warpath, it isn't safe to leave the women-folk at home without a guard—unless Black Sam is handy with his tricks!

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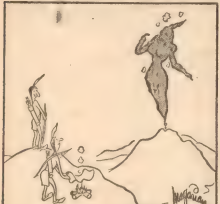
RIDIN' HERD *with the Editor*

LAST month we ballyhooed John Di Silvestro's forthcoming novel, "Indian Gamble"—and with very good reason. Johnny's been hitting us with some pretty nice shorts as you know, but this is the first time he's tried a novel for us. It's a western story with a twist—one of the most unusual we've ever had a chance to read and we predict you're going to like it. If there is anything an Indian likes to do, it's to gamble—well, that isn't so bad except that when they decide to play cards—poker in particular—they like high stakes. You might say that they like to play for blood . . .

DON WILCOX—you've seen plenty of him in *Amazing Stories* and *Fantastic Adventures*—turns in a clever piece of work with this month's western, "Limpy's Gulch". Limpy is a cowpuncher with a game leg, but that doesn't stop him from being a man among men. In fact, he's better than most even though he has to fight the rottenest type of slander. Let us know how you like it, gang.

AS you've probably noticed, lately there are a lot of good western films coming out. The Hollywood boys are beginning to realize that a good western story is an entertaining a story as any other kind—better, in fact, than most. We don't want to make any predictions, but keep your eye peeled on next month's lead novel by Frank Gruber, "The Broken Lance." It's a first rate story, Frank Gruber lives in Hollywood, and . . . Draw your own conclusions. We're hoping.



"Princess Redbird wants us to meet her there."

WE left out "The Reader Rides The Range" this month because things are a bit upset in the publishing world. Shortages, strikes, etc. have interrupted our usual smooth-running schedule, but we'll have it back as soon as possible.

ALEXANDER BLADE comes up this month with a fine story, " . . . You Came To Kill." It's set in the modern west and has a nice treatment of a man who comes back to his home town only to find—no, we're too ready to spoil the whole thing. When will we learn to keep our big mouth shut!

"THE DARK SIDE" by Jack Colt introduces a new writer to *Mammoth Western*. We ask you to notice how the story opens up. "A man's life is a street that reaches from the cradle to the grave . . ." How true that is! The author sounds a little bitter but he isn't—he's just realistic.

FRANCIS M. DEEGAN'S "The Laughing Bull" is a humorous western that'll have you rolling out of the saddle. Notice the illustration for the story. We think that it tells half the tale. "Petticoat Fort" by D. Francis also has a humorous angle, but it's only to relieve the grim tragedy that might have been. Sometimes there's a closer relationship between tragedy and humor than we like to think about. Anyhow give the stories a reading and let us know what you think.

WE'VE been receiving a lot of favorable comment on the articles we've been running. Sometimes it's embarrassing—some people like the articles better than the stories! Regardless, we're going to keep giving you the best of both. Notice your new feature, "Reflections From The West's Earliest Days." Early western history is jammed with interesting events, and we think you'll get a charge out of not only reading about them, but seeing them as well. Let us know.

THAT about cleans up this issue. From the material we've got on our desk now, we can promise you plenty of interesting reading for the future. And there's always more coming. Remember to get next month's *Mammoth Western*, featuring Frank Gruber's "The Broken Lance." It's a terrific story of war—and love. So long for now . . . RAP

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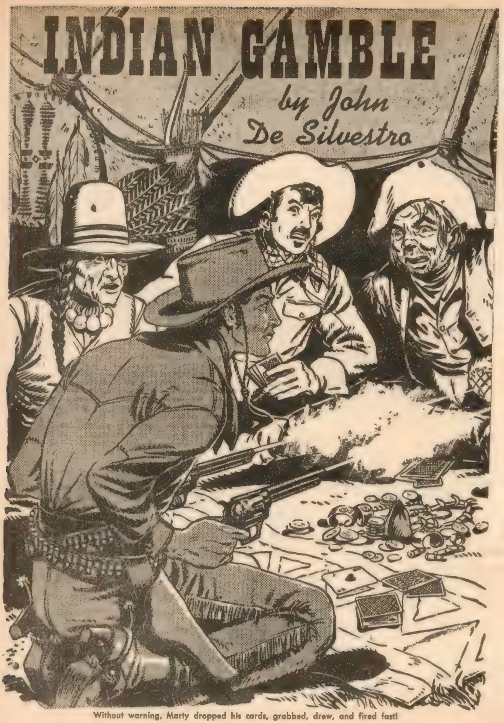
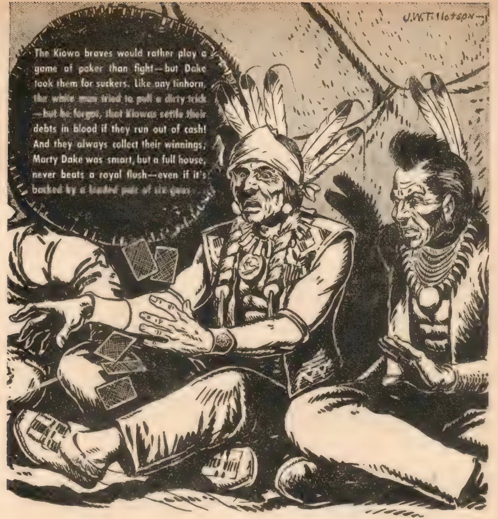
INDIAN GAMBLE

by John De Silvestro



Without warning, Marty dropped his cards, grabbed, drew, and fired fast!



The Kiowa braves would rather play a game of poker than fight—but Dake took them for suckers. Like any tinhorn, the white man tried to pull a dirty trick—but he forgot, that Kiowas settle their debts in blood if they run out of cash! And they always collect their winnings; Marty Dake was smart, but a full house, never beats a royal flush—even if it's backed by a loaded pair of six-guns.

"SHH" warned old Fred, "here comes Five."

Billy Janner felt the fear roll through his stomach. Guard No. 5. He went lax as the sound of a man's asthmatic breathing was audible at the cell door of the prison.

Facing the wall Billy Janner thought of many thing. He thought of what he would do to No. 5 if they ever met on the outside. He would kick a hole through his well padded belly; kick the jeering head from the powerful shoulders. He'd stomp the wheezing breath out of his miserable carcass.

"Everything comfy?" came the familiar voice.

The cot became unbearably warm. Janner tried to be rational. "Tomorrow I'm getting out," he told himself. "I haven't lost my temper once since I raked him with that tin cup on that first day. I've got to keep cool. Tomorrow I'll be away from here."

"I said if everything was comfy, my beauties?"

There was no reply.

He laughed. "If anything happens to good old No. 5 after you're released, Janner, everybody in this cage row gets the club. They'll get it like you got it three years ago, Billy. Understand?"

Janner understood.

"Well go 'head an' gab," came the familiar voice. "It's your last night here, Billy . . . I won't listen . . . You can say all the nice things you want to each other."

Janner didn't turn away from the wall. Five might still be there. On rubber soles it was impossible to determine whether he had slid away or stood there waiting.

It was possible to be warned of his approach by some convict who spied him moving past his cell and spreading the alarm by clinking metal against the stone wall of his cell. Sound traveled. It traveled as did the Kansas Pacific. The prison would never be built that could do away with a communication system that daring, desperate men conceived.

Prison is the place for lucid, penetrating thought. But at night everything was a torturing blur; only the keen ears of Fred discerning that floating hollowness which heralded the approach of No. 5.

"He's gone," said Fred.

Janner came to his feet; he went and knelt before the old man's cot. "I'm going crazy, Fred. I can't sleep—"

"No, son, you ain't goin' crazy. Long's yuh think yo're rattled you're as normal as a honey suckin' b'ar." He chuckled softly. "When you starts to thinkin' yo're all powerful sane is the time to start frettin'."

"What if Marty isn't there?" whispered Janner.

"He shouldn't be there."

"But before the robbery we said we'd meet in the Guadalope mountains and divvy up. He'll be there."

"Son, you got a lot of faith in this Marty Dake critter . . . That was three year ago."

"He's all right."

"Yeh, I know. You was friends as lads, wasn't yuh?"

Janner nodded. "We would've done anything for each other. The only thing we didn't do was sleep together."

The old convict chuckled. "Me'n my brother was like that 'til the posse cut down Paulie."

The two caged men didn't utter a sound for a long while.

"Yuh never told me how yuh was caught?" said Fred.

"We stopped the buggy of a rich fellow. Marty took the money—dunno how much—and we split up. I got caught when my horse went lame. We were to meet in our camp in the mountains."

"He wasn't caught, uh?"

"No—not Marty."

"How 'bout thet gal yuh talk to in your sleep?"

"Nancy?"

"Yeh."

"Was to marry her. That's why we robbed that big fellow. It was mostly my idea."

"She know you got caught and sent here?"

"Dunno."

"Yuh don't talk like us, boy. I nivver wanted to ask—but I ain't nivver gonna have last-night shivers—mebbe yuh can make it a little interestin' for me."

"Sure, Fred. Me 'n Marty were born in Chicago. God only knows who our folks were. We came out here looking for a chance . . . We didn't make good."

"Son, why don't yuh take it easy when yo're out. Yuh probably want a lotta elbow room. Hook up with a spread—or git in the cavalry. Plenty of action and chance for to git ahead."

"*If* Marty's still got my half of the money I got my start."

"Don't count on thet, boy."

"I ain't."

"Good."

"Fred?"

"Yeh?"

"You helped me in here. Maybe some day I can get you out of here."

"Thanks . . . But it's no use. This here's my second stay here—and my last, I won't last out the summer."

"Naa. Just keep thinking of me. I'll make some money—and money makes all kinds of people do all kinds of things."

THE old man laughed, a touch of whimsey watering his eyes. "My last three mates in this here cell told me that, boy."

"Billy Janner's telling you now."

"I'd give my good eye to believe in thet, boy."

"I swear it."

"How old are you, Billy?"

"Twenty two, I guess."

"You growed up alla sudden." The old man's pinched face trembled with an emotion that shattered the kid's hard exterior. "I dream of gittin' outa here, Billy. T'ain't nothin' else a feller kin' do. Mebbe I'll feel good for awhile after yo're gone."

"I'll mail you tobacco an' stuff. We never did have enough."

"I'd appreciate thet right fine."

"And I'll give good Louis a couple of dollars when I'm legally freed, and tell him to give you a couple of swallows of that gurgle water you like so much."

"My own son couldn't make me happier."

"You old hellion."

"Yeh, yo're all right, Billy, but git rid of yore foolish notions right pronto and save yoreself a passel of misery."

"I ain't. Fred, I haven't a foolish notion in my head."

"Be careful 'bout thet first little gal yuh sneak up on when yo're out, boy . . . Be careful thetaway."

"I know."

"Take it easy like. Yuh'll get the shivers like all hell, yuh'll go hot an' cold and be fit to die but yuh'll like dyin' thet way. Yes siree, yuh'll like it right fine."

"You old squaw men know all the answers, huh?"

Fred chuckled. "Some times I'd give my good eye for a girl friend."

"I'll make my money, pop. I'll make it and get you outa here if I have to blow this damned place apart with cannon."

"I believe yuh. I'm gonna believe it 's long 's I kin last."

And Billy Janner went to his cot. He hadn't thought much of women in here. He'd had too much else to clutter up his mind. He grinned in the darkness and his heart began a steady tom-toming that abated only when he gulped the damp air with his gasping mouth.

Then some kindly spirit wafted away the hot thoughts of women.

"God," he prayed, "let Marty be there. I need the money . . . Jesus, I need something.

CHAPTER II

SMOKE issued lazily from the straight nostrils of Martin L. Dake, Indian trader and sucker for a lost cause.

He quickly shuffled the pack of dirty cards. He had an excellent war bonnet before him plus some three hundred dollars in yellowbacks and gold pieces and a very finely carved silver Mexican saddle lay on the green blanket.

The three Kiowas eyed him solemnly. He threw the cigar away.

"War bonnet against saddle," Dake said slowly, pointing and using handsigns to supplement his speech. He knew that an Indian always understood in times of great stress—or when seated around a gambling blanket.

"No," said the youngest, a buck of some twenty years. His stiff face slowly gentled. He pointed to the money laying before the white man. That too."

Dake made a great show of deliberating over the issue. He knew from three months of experience that his red brother's main reason for gambling was with the vain hope of wagering his lesser article against something of greater value.

Standing Dog, a short coil of red flesh that didn't seem sufficient to go all around his stunted body, smiled good naturedly. "You don't want to play for good saddle worth heap gold?"

Dake matched the fetching smile of the little brave. "No." He waited.

The big Kiowa rose, stretched his arms majestically, yawning with a great display of weariness.

"Him sleepy," said Standing Dog in broken English. "Maybe him go to sleep?"

Dake carefully repressed what almost amounted to an uncontrollable urge to laugh. They were like children. He decided that he had toyed with them long enough."

"Me,"—Dake pointed to his thick stomach—"Me tired too, heap much, all right, I play for saddle. All I got against all you got."

The buck nodded pointing to the ornate, exquisitely carved saddle. It was all he had left.

Dake made a sign of resignation and passed out five cards to the Indian and to himself. It was regulation five card, close-to-the-belly poker with jacks openers.

Dake looked at the cards which the Indian had fanned close to his eyes; his friends huddled about him making clucking sounds with their tongues for the unfortunate adversary of their most wonderful brother.

Dake allowed a worried frown to dimple his round, deeply tanned face. He again studied the cards which were fanned before the Indian's glittering eyes. There was a ten, jack, deuce, trey and six between the grimy fingers of the Kiowa.

"How many cards?"

The Indian smiled with brilliant ease, then with a snake-like speed swished the cards into a compact pack and shook his head from side to side. "No jacks or better," he said.

So Dake smiled. He had two tens, a jack, queen and a king. "I open," he said, discarding the picture cards.

The Indians went into a huddle, whispering and patting their noble friend on the back, urging him on to greater feats of daring.

The Indian threw four cards onto the blanket.

Dake shook his head sadly, holding up three fingers. "Only three you can throw away."

THE Indian nodded, grinning, picking up his discards and carefully extracted one. He now held the jack and deuce.

Dake gave him a trey, four and king, dropping three cards near his hand. He carefully watched the Indian; for one moment Dake glanced at his hand which held two fours, two tens and an ace.

"No," growled Dake, slapping at the hard hand of the Indian as he had tried to pick up some picture cards.

The trio rose, smiled at Dake, and walked away.

"Damned fools," muttered Dake. But he had made an understandable move. The Kiowa had held a worthless hand, knew it, and attempted to add to its power by a bit of cheating. When playing with the Indians the man who gave himself the best hand was the victor. Cheating was nothing to be ashamed of; but it was a hardship if one were caught. Then one had to forfeit the pot.

Dake got to his feet, flexing his numbed muscles, staring automatically at the magnificent reaches of the Guadalope mountains. Then he made the saddle he had won secure on the rump of his mount, put the money into his pockets and rolled the War Bonnet in the blanket.

He mounted and kneed the pony toward the tiny, firry blur in the distance which was Fort Guadalope which had been erected to bring discipline to the Comanches and Kiowas who infested the high levels of the Guadalope mountains.

He smiled proudly; even with a marked deck you had to be careful with the red devils. Dammit, if he would've came to this territory earlier he would have had a fortune by this time. But he had always been lucky.

"Billy got caught and I didn't," he thought. "And we were to meet back there to divvy up." He patted his stomach and the bulge of the money belt under his broadcloth coat.

Yes, he felt very very good. He had Billy's half of the loot for him plus twenty one hundred which he had earned with his trading and gambling. He and Billy would make a coup that'd make the rest of their lives one beautiful rush of time with nothing to worry about.

He was certain that Billy would head for the Guadalope when he got out of the territorial prison. Where else could Billy go? He had no friends other than himself . . . And Dake mused, "I ain't got no other friend but Billy."

He cursed sharply. "Hope to God they didn't take too much out of him." He set the Indian pony to a faster pace. He wanted some hot coffee and a beef steak. Yes sir, nothing like a good poker game to give a man a good appetite.

Fort Guadalope was more of a rude stockade than a carefully constructed fort. The high timbered walls were as secure as any vegetable materials could be welded but it was merely a tiny two-company frontier post which made travel along the Guadalope trail a bit safer and left no doubt to the wily Indians as to where their many enemies made their headquarters.

Many crude shacks, cabins and tents of traders dotted the level portions of ground outside the walls of the stockade.

DAKE dismounted before one of the sturdier little cabins and carried his booty into the cool darkness of the hut. He quickly set fire to the wood burning stove and stretched his aching muscles.

There was an added little box-like space at the end of the room which a sturdy lock protected by tightly latching the opening which was the size of a window.

He deposited the War Bonnet and the saddle into this crowded space, mentally totaling the value of the articles.

"About thirty-five hundred," he guessed, and smiled happily. He strutted about the room, greasing a frying pan the while, and stripping the choice piece of beef which he had saved for supper. He set the coffee to boiling and carefully tended to the steak.

He didn't have much to do with the other Indian trader, but Captain Von Renbeck, the post commander, was kindly disposed toward him. He even invited him to sit in on the poker games which the good natured German officer was so fond of.

"And I don't use my cards," Dake told the inanimate piece of beef. "Honest!" He laughed. Tonight he would be playing with intelligent men, such as:

Captain Von Renbeck and his surprising cosmopolitan wit; Lt. Vito Canzone and his musical voice, and the young, second lieutenant Edward Screenman, whose Jewish temperament allowed him to follow any thought formation and wisely steer the hot headed Italian from disastrous wagers and arguments.

The beef steak was ready and Dake devoured it with the wholesome ill manners of a man who has greater delights to look forward to than a thick, choice cut of beef.

He downed the coffee with loud gulping sounds, sucking in a good deal of air between times, and as a consequence being forced to pause in order to belch appreciably.

His meal completed Dake eyed the frying pan which had served as a plate, the battered tin cup and the smoke seared coffee pot.

Before he could invent an excuse for leaving the table in disorder he washed and dried the utensils, careful to leave a couple of cups of coffee in the pot for his bedtime whiskey and coffee.

He pulled out his thick time piece and stared at it. It was 5:30 in the afternoon. The mountain chill was making the snug room a haven and he was loathe to go outside and fetch some shaving water.

The room was of a twelve by twelve dimension with thick buffalo hides in lieu of glass, a sturdy short table, the sputtering rickety wood burning stove, a wide wooden cot and three chairs. The room was very tidy despite Dake's tendencies to the contrary.

He shaved slowly; a razor nick always enraging him to the point where he had to wait out his nervous spasms in order to continue. And in the event that he would carve a serious nick on his visage he would never go about with a hairy underlip or chin. When he started an operation he completed it regardless of the amount of blood spilled, considering the fact that he could make is seem plausible to himself.

He finished shaving without any serious mishap, remarkable for a chore of scraping a fluffy, yellowish six days' growth, and quickly stripped.

He wasn't fat. There were his thick, blocky shoulders and thick stomach which a winter season would properly proportion.

He stood five feet and nine inches; his weight would have been safely reckoned at the one-ninety mark. He had acquired his passion for foods in the orphanage, but he had never thought of refining it. He just wanted plenty of it when he wanted it.

He warmed some water in a five gallon can and with an eely quickness completed his ablution with sailorish thoroughness and donned clean red flannel underwear, new looking breeches, a thick gray woolen shirt and his best corduroy jacket. He applied a rag to his boots, adding that delicate glow to his foot gear.

By six-thirty he would have made a sought after guest in any woman's league. He had allowed his medium blonde hair to grow at will, thinking it the proper thing for a westerner, but it irked him. He had to keep flinging the long strands of hair from his eyes as a woman did.

ON THE impulse he took a scissors from the capacious saddle bag which hung near the cot and deftly barbered himself. It was a jagged piece of work, but he carefully combed his thick matting of hair, adding some of the meat grease, and with the smugness of an honest man he decided that only a wind of galish proportions could disrupt his fine hair arrangement.

"Damned if I ain't fit to be marrying," he told his reflection in the tiny mirror. But something was missing. He had forgotten something. Yes! He quickly went to the saddle-bag and extracted a little leather pouch, which contained a short, wooden handled article with white bristles on the edge of it. It appeared to be a miniature brush. He dropped some salt on his palm and rubbed the bristled end of the tiny brush into it and set to scrubbing his teeth. Mr. Dake had an honest dread of that inhuman butcher termed the dentist.

This final nicety completed he decided to do away with the vile taste in his mouth by downing a glass of whisky. He did, and lit a long slightly bent cigar.

"Within an hour," he thought, "I'll be playing poker. I won't have to strain my eyes to see the markings of the cards. It will be an honest game with the better man winning."

His stomach felt burdensome for that enchanting minute when one turns over in his mind a favorite dream. Only it was a reality to Mr. Dake, and he reveled in that glorious face.

He really enjoyed playing square poker. But with the Indians . . . If he didn't dupe them somebody else would. "And hell, didn't he trade or sell necessities to them—at a nice profit, of course?"

Before blowing out the flame in the lantern a sudden thought stroked his nerve centers. *Billy should have been here.* He wanted Billy to come. He wanted Billy to come. Hell, that would be his reward for the past fourteen weeks of devilish dealings and double-dealings with the dangerous braves.

"God, let him come," prayed Dake. "Jesus, I ain't got nobody else to show off to—devil take it—I like that feller."

And Dake went out into the tearing mountain wind, walking toward the swaying gates of the outpost. Billy'd like Vonney, Vito and Eddie," he thought. "But I hope they didn't suck too much out of him in *there.*"

That evening Mr. Dake lost nine hundred and twenty dollars. Lt. Canzone dropped three hundred; the affable 2nd. Lieutenant Screenman contributing four hundred and twenty dollars to the winner of the evening one Captain Dolph Von Renbeck.

"True, Captain," had commented Canzone belligerently, "but you better allow me more trading privileges or your pack shall be a trio." This outburst coming after the Captain had genially stated that he had never had such a fine pack of friends.

"You must," said Creenman.

The Captain seemed amused. "Why, Lieutenant?"

"Our Bill of Rights, you know . . . Sometimes there's a marked emphasis on a *pursuit of happiness*.". . .. .

"God willing, I shall," said the commander with a sudden appeal to the heavens. He devoutly believed that games of chance were just that, plus an enormous run of luck. And he was absolutely correct. He had held three flushes during the evening's play.

"Ah," sighed the swarthy little Indian. "I still have my squaw, thank God."

They laughed, drank a good-night toast and saw Dake to the gate. Dake thought they were the finest fellows on earth.

"WELL," said Von Renbeck," "that gives us each three hundred, six dollars and sixty-six cents apiece."

"Right," said Screenman.

"He's a fool," said Canzone.

"We give him a chance," said Screenman. "We don't cheat. We merely play against him. We have no prearranged signals. We played as if our money was at stake—as it was—and we share the winnings of one of our group."

"Quite true," said Von Renbeck. "But it seems distasteful to divide such a nice sum in three quarters."

Canzone smiled, showing well sanded teeth. "This is only the second time that you've won, dear captain."

"I'm not complaining, mind you," said the captain quickly.

"Of course not," said Screenman. And they went to their seperate quarters.

There is one special minute before the grotesqueness of sleep overtakes a man when everything seems worthless. But they made no fervid promises at that peculiar time. In the morning everything would seem fine.

"And aren't they as guilty as I?" thought one of the officers, as the vagueness of sleep made his head a ponderous thing to move to a cool spot on the pillow.

But before sleep took him off completely the vague and tenuous thought of Janner went through his mind, Janner, friend and pal . . .

CHAPTER III

"GOD," thought Janner, "the stink of a horse is better than the two legged kind."

It had taken fourteen weeks of back breaking labor at Fort Zara to earn the scrubby little pony; but it was worth it. The cheap, stiff new boots they had issued him at the prison were cracking a little but that was a blessing.

He remembered this Medina River country with its long deep hallows worn by the torrential mountain storms; and the thickets which made it a devious, torturous route in case of danger.

Janner wisely rested the little dun-colored pony after the short swift gallop to the summit of Bandera pass. Before him stretched a three mile sloping piece of prairie which was wide and bare of thickets.

He debated the stratagem of risking the open piece of ground during the brightness of that late afternoon or waiting 'til night fall.

"Injuns like to catch fellers on that nekked stretch," had said old sergeant-major Fosser at Fort Zara. "Since that post's been put up in the mountains you got a good chance of getting to your place—but."

"But what?" Janner had asked.

"But, son, I'd be mighty keerful over thet stretch."

"Dammit," snarled Janner, kneeing the pony forward, "I can't waste no time." Maybe Dake'll pull out if he thinks I'm not headed for our old camp.

He whipped the pony to a full gallop, feeling the sting of fresh mountain air against his face and throat.

To the left. Riders. *Indians.*

They took up the chase. He didn't look back again; he hadn't lived through more than a thousand days and nights of sheer hell to make sport for some red devils.

He plunged through the woods and thickets that fringed the Verde river. His freshened pony had given him a good lead over his pursuers.

The Verde was at floating level. Without a second thought he plunged the pony into the icy waters. Fear of the Indians gentled his mind against the possibility of some mishap while crossing the treacherously swollen Verde.

For six or seven miles the gallant little pony sped over the fairly broad Indian trail. And as the gloom of nightfall increased the menacing shadows Janner left the Indian trail for a tiny rutting of open prairie and the surrounding protection of the ever present thickets beyond.

Resting his mount in the fading light he saw the shimmer of the Guadalope river and a thin, barely distinctive line of smoke coming from somewhere along the bed of the river.

More Indians? Janner quivered with fear, but his prison dulled nerves were an advantage. He slanted into the thickets, skirting deeply in a circle until he reached a high vantage place which afforded him a better view of the river.

Then the Indians who had been chasing him hove into sight below. Undoubtedly they had also sighted the smoke. Then with a frantic wave of his arm their leader motioned them to retreat.

Janner grinned heading the pony toward the friendly columns of smoke.

"Halt," snarled a voice.

"Friend—white," yelled Janner.

"I know. Dismount."

Janner dismounted, leading his pony toward the cherry glow of the large fire.

A young officer rose from the ground. He stood as tall as Janner with a smooth, dust clotted face. He said:

"I'm Lt. Screenman. Did you come across any Indians?"

"They came across me."

"When?"

"Two—three hours ago. They were on my tail 'til they spotted your smoke."

"How many?"

"Six or seven, not sure."

"Blast it; there's no chance of overtaking them now."

Janner nodded. "Heard there's a post in the Guadalope."

"Right. You're welcome to join us; we're returning to it."

They crossed the Guadalope. It was a routine scout for the twenty troopers under Lt. Screenman. They had merely been poking about the thickets, firing at any suspicious blur, keeping whatever marauding band that dared cross the Guadalope on their toes and unable to make the high reaches of the Guadalope mountains from which they could pounce upon any prey worth the risk.

Janner's untrained muscles were throbbing wickedly as they came within sight of the fort.

"From East?" asked Screenman.

"Chicago." No lie, that's where he was born and reared.

"Thought so, you're plenty pale."

Janner laughed briefly.

AS THEY clattered past the cabins outside the walls of the fort Janner carefully studied the terrain. It was familiar. *There it was!* High off in the distance—yet definable—was a stream which crookedly disappeared under an over-hanging sledge of corroded rock which was formed as a sprawled out woman.

That had been their camp.

After tending to his pony and dining with the friendly troopers he decided to saunter through the crooked paths that led to the many cabins of civilian traders.

He counted about twenty cabins before his sight swam and he gasped for breath. He had merely forgotten to breath. There stood Marty.

"Marty!" His coyotish bellow bringing heads out of doors.

Dake ran toward his friend. Janner slipped and fell, picking himself up heedless of aching knees and back.

They embraced.

"You madman," croaked Janner.

"You helling son."

"I knew you'd be here."

"Like to have seen anybody keep me away from here," boasted Dake, taking his comrade's arm and leading him toward the cabin.

"You built it?" asked Janner.

"Me?" laughed Dake. "Hell, I won it in a poker game. C'mon"—Dake grandly waved his hand toward the door—"Welcome to three-deuse manor, suh."

"After you, hog-foot."

There followed that inevitable silence that only old and tested friends can frankly enjoy.

"Don't know where to start," said Dake.

"Any place." Guard No. 5 was merely some forgotten caged animal now.

"Well after—after that little *chore*—I came here, thinking you'd be along any day. . . We were crazy to've tried a daylight robbery."

Janner laughed. He couldn't get enough of the joy through his throat, it would have choked him if he hadn't tried to expel some of it.

"We were crazy all right," admitted Janner.

"I'm going to give it to you straight about Nancy, Bill. After I'd found out that they had caught you I told her you joined the cavalry. Naturally she thought you didn't want her any more—and . . ."

"Who, Marty?"

"That grinning blonde kid, you remember, Georgie."

"Nice fellow."

"I didn't think you'd want her to know you were in the prison."

"No—thanks."

Again silence reigned. They stared at each other across the rough boards of the table.

"Here. . ." Dake tore a few buttons off his shirt in his eagerness to get to the money belt. "Had it saved for you, every penny of your share, eleven hundred." He threw rolls of bills onto the table top.

Janner touched the crumbled bank note, feeling none of the exhilaration he had imagined.

"Poor pay," said Janner, "got to make up for it now, Billy."

"Yea—but wait'll you hear what we're going to do."

"What?" detachedly.

"Indian trade. It's the best thing. I've made a for—well enough—and in only four months!"

"You savvy their talk?"

"Sure all you need is some brains. The sign talk'll come easy."

"Got some coffee?"

"Sure—I forgot—some good beef too."

"No, just the coffee."

"You gotta fatten up, Billy. You're eating."

Janner smiled. "You take your own

advice, don't you."

"I don't care how fat I'll get. I swore back there in Chicago that I'd get to be the fatest man in the world."

"Too bad nobody ever wanted to bet on your belly-line."

Dake nodded, sobering. "Say, Billy, you care to talk about anything?"

"No—reckon not."

"Make you feel better."

"Know: It was just tough. Nothing to do, bad food, bad treatment. But you get used to it. You can get used to anything."

Dake met and held his friend's gaze. "How do you feel—honestly—how *do* you feel?"

"Feel like there's nothing to live for."

"Wrong, Billy. There's the yellow god to live for; the only necessary god. Yellowbacks! Money is all a smart man wants."

"Any pews for sale in that church, Marty?"

"Hell, we're going to build it."

"NO, I won't play you for money," Dake said stubbornly.

"Scared?"

"Ha."

"Come on, hog-foot, let's have a nice stud game."

"You earned that money, Billy. Damned if I feel like playing with you for it."

"Think I'd let you keep the money you won from me?" jeered Janner.

"All right, but I play for keeps."

"Who the hell wants your money?"

They laughed, and in the feeble glitter of the lantern they played deep into the night for nothing more than to feel the cards that their hands had warmed.

"Had enough?" said Janner, yawning.

"Guess so, I just discarded two queens."

"Could go with some more coffee."

"Go 'head, make some."

"Cut," said Janner, "loser makes it."

"Ace low, Billy?"

"Ace always high."

Dake shuffled the cards, set them on the table. Janner pushed over a six. Dake carefully studied the greasy pack, then lazily flipped over a deuce.

"Too bad—make it good and strong," said Janner.

"Fix up the bed—throw a couple of blankets on the floor for me, Billy."

"You crazy?" said Janner. "I've had enough of sleeping indoors."

"It gets colder'n hell out there."

"And stuffy in here."

"Snake bite?"

"Let 'em. I promised myself a nice sleep with only the blue yonder over me."

Dake shivered. "Well, take my gear there."

"Thanks . . ." And the coffee was drunk and a great deal of Dake's prize whiskey was dunked into coffeeless cups.

Janner walked toward the bed, hiccoughing gently.

"Ain'tcha gonna sleep outside with the little rocks and snakes no more?" Dake asked tremulously.

"Dam right."

Dake good naturedly piled blankets on Janner's outstretched arms and led him to a level clearing behind the snug cabin. He helped his friend get settled and returned to the cabin.

Janner didn't mind the cold, he had blankets. He didn't mind the hard earth, he had a tough hide.

He dreamed of soft women under that cold sky. Women who had smiling lips and blistering fingertips.

He was in hell with only the cool, whipping mountain winds to alleviate the pain that numbed his heated body. But he was a free man now and he was forgetting the face of Guard No. 5. And the club of Guard No. 5.

He was forgetting that and he could forget Nancy. He really didn't care about anything any more. He arrived at this decision in his sleep. The half wakefulness that convicts develop. He finally relaxed. He had a big job ahead of him. He was going to be rich, powerful. What else could he do?

And on that little ledge behind the cabin, the mountain winds scudded away every hampering thought. He knew he would succeed.

CHAPTER IV

JANNER came awake as the friendly warmth of the blankets was whisked away.

"We keep early hours," said Dake, grinning down at the shivering Janner.

Janner stuck out his hand; Dake grasped it and gave him a hand-up.

"Aaa my back."

"Should've slept in."

"What did you give me to drink last night?"

"Coffee."

"Mighty potent coffee, hog-foot."

"C'mon, let's get some grub in our stomachs, word is that some Comanches are coming in with some mighty fine pelts."

"How much do you pay them for the skins?" Janner asked, yawning widely.

"Pay? Hell it's mostly barter. Got to keep reminding the devils of the money price of things through, but we seldom give it to them. They reason that money takes the place of pelts and other barter goods. They can't eat money."

They entered the cabin and Janner poured a cup of coffee, gulping it down with eager noisy swallows.

"The deal's fifty-fifty," said Dake. "All right with you?"

"No. You said you've got plenty already. That's not mine."

"Don't give me no arguments. I can trust you. There aren't any two Indian trading partners in this section. We can clean up. Just knowing I can turn my back on the stuff gives me a nice feeling."

Janner nodded. "Got some water?"

"Outside, bucket. I'll go set up the stuff out front."

The long crudely constructed bench held the treasures of Dake & Janner. The early mountain brightness reflected the magnificent workmanship of the Mexican saddle and brave glitter of the war bonnet. There also was a half sack of salt, boxes of matches and a couple pounds of loaf sugar cut into tiny blocks. A bolt of calico completed the stock.

"We the only traders here?" asked Janner.

Dake smiled ruefully. "No, most all of the people here trade with the Indians. Most of 'em have trading rooms in their cabins or use 'em for such."

"Why do you keep the stuff in the open?"

"Cabin's my—our home. It's going to stay that way. Anyway I get more trade than the rest."

"And they were here before you?"

"Yep. I'll gamble with 'em for anything they like. I taught some of 'em how to poker."

"They learned?" Janner's face showed surprise.

"You learned the alphabet, didn't you? They love to gamble. They're quick enough when it comes to something they like."

"Here they come."

A flat muscled brave wearing a

gaudy tie over his bare chest, supplemented by breech-cloth and moccasins. He pointed to the calico.

"What you got?" asked Dake.

The buck waved to some companions who came to the trading bench. They carried dressed deer and wolf skins.

Dake spun some of the calico from the bolt, showing it off in the early morning sunshine. The Indian touched it, drawing his hand over the crude design with a lover's gentleness.

Dake said slowly, "I will sell you this for forty cents a yard."

The Indian shook his head slowly. "No money."

"Then I'll give you twenty five cents for each hide," Dake said, pointing to the skins.

The Indian shook his head.

"Sugar?"

The Indian pointed to the calico, motioning his companions to dump the eight expertly dressed hides on the bench. "How much calico for that?" he asked using broken English and signs.

"Well," Dake said thoughtfully, "Calico is forty cents a yard, I'll give you twelve yards. Hily, the other trader, pays only twenty cents for hides, I'll give you twenty-five cents apiece."

"How much?" asked the brave, tapping the calico bolt.

"Twelve yards."

The Indian nodded and Dake scissored twelve yards of the flimsy material and handed it to the buck.

"Anything else?" asked Dake.

THE Indians shook their heads and Dake told Janner to set the pelts off to advantage on the empty space near the edge of the bench.

"See," said Dake. "They don't understand the value of money; they'll never understand it in a million years. It confounds 'em. But you must always keep repeating the money price; that sets 'em on the defensive."

"You really rooked that poor son," said Janner.

"Business. Those hides will bring two-three hundred from the New York agent."

A few minor barters were negotiated when a party of five cold-eyed Comanches halted before their bench. They carefully foot-tied the ten ponies that they brought and dropped a sack of coins on the pelts which Dake and Janner had recently acquired.

"Cards—poker," said the tallest, a broad shouldered, well meated chieftain.

Dake grinned, dispatched Janner to get the gambling blanket from the cabin. It was spread out on the even ledge behind the cabin and Dake waved Janner to tend to the frontside of the business.

A short, heavily built man with murderous little blue eyes stomped to a halt before Janner. "Where's Dake?" he snarled.

Janner said softly, "'Tending to business."

"Go fetch him."

"You got feet."

"Who're you?"

"Partner."

"So! Now they's two of 'em to wreck my tradin'."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen: Those Comanch that came here was first at my cabin—savvy?"

"No."

"Wal they looked over my stuff and after I talks myself black in the face they says they're going to poker with Dake, sayin' they jus' came to my shack to kill some time while Dake finishes up with some other Injuns."

"So?"

"So I'm goin' to take ker of yore partner right now. Where—" a wild victorious yell from one of the Comanches filled the air— "Don't worry I'll find 'im meself."

Janner decided to 'tend to the frontside of the business and let Marty take care of himself.

Five minutes later the raging little barrel-chested man stormed from the rear of the cabin. "Young feller," he snarled, "yuh better pick a smarter partner."

Janner grinned at the retreating back of the bearded, dirty, little hulk. "You better pick some other feller," he mused aloud.

"THAT'LL be all for today," Dake said, emerging from the back of the cabin. "I'll go over to the fort and sell those broncs." He tossed the bag of coins to his mate.

"You took the Comanch?"

"Yep. Remind me to mark a new deck tonight. Hell, those thieving cusses knew what the queen and jack of spades were 'cause those cards were bent."

Janner laughed. "Since when have you took to card sharping?"

"Not exactly sharping, Billy. I just mark the cards. You know I can lose!"

"How?"

"If the Indians get a good run of luck I'm cooked—if I know they got better cards than me I can only get mad."

"You're really making it hard for yourself, huh?"

Dake chuckled. "Hell, I was only talking. Did that Cordick give you any cusses or trouble?"

"Little chunky fellow?"

"Yea—yes. That's Arney Cordick. Thinks he's the nice side of the stick."

"I told him we're partners and he told me to get a new partner."

"Ha. He's tough, 'll give him that much credit. Nobody has much to do with him. He thinks all of the fat trade should be his."

"There's twenty dollar pieces in this bag, Marty."

"Six hundred."

"Ponies?"

"Bring about five thousand. Comanches're the best thieves we have. They know horse flesh. I'll sell 'em to the fort for five hundred apiece because I'll get the cash on the spot and don't have to haggle."

"Does Cordick know you make your luck, Marty?"

Dake frowned. "Dunno. Never used a marked deck with whites—ain't got the skill or guts—but he may guess. Know what I told him when he came back there to bullypuss me?"

"What?"

"Told him not to come interfering with me during business hours or I'd send my partner to badger him while I could still 'tend to business."

Janner grinned. "You're really fixing it right for me."

Dake wearily rubbed his chin. "Cordick thinks he's tough. He's stomped two or three while I've been here. Rumor is that he's got some connections with the high Indians."

"Dammit," growled Janner, "explain what you say to me. I'm *new*."

"Oh—those Indians who're ranched high"—He pointed toward the seemingly unscaleable heights of the Guadalope mountains—"they're bad—rifles are gotten somehow and sold to them at good prices."

"And he sells 'em to the high Indians?"

"Right. . . C'mon, let's put away our stuff. Better: You put away the stuff, you know the cache at the back of cabin, and I'll go to the quarter-master and sell 'im the ponies. They need every mount they can get."

"What're we going to eat?" asked Janner.

Dake said slowly, "I'll have the army cook fix us a spread. Ponies are valuable."

"Will he?"

"The commander and his aids are my friends. They're a good bunch. Have you meet them tonight." He added, "When you're done come to the fort for the feed."

Janner nodded and started carrying the stores into the cabin. It seemed a monstrous dream to him that they had netted nearly six thousand within six hours. But this had been a good day.

He wondered how the little bear-like man could be bested. But he couldn't harbor any ill feelings this fine afternoon. Let Cordick worry about them.

CHAPTER V

JANNER opened his eyes to an eye-aching dampness and sounds of a slashing mountain rain. He quickly pulled on boots, pants and shirt. He started the fire in the stove and awaited results. He shivered while the stove de-emphasized the cold, but mentally he was still frozen.

"What in hell?" slurred Dake sleepily from the cot. "You up, Billy?"

Janner grunted, clatterin coffee-pot, cups and spoons.

"Blast it, make less noise will you, Billy." But the smell of coffee and bacon got him to dress hurriedly. They breakfasted and sat sipping the coffee.

"Any trading today?" Billy asked, staring at the closed window-ports.

"No. Too cold and wet for that. Indians don't like the cold."

"What'll we do?"

"Go on over to the saloon and maybe sit in on a poker game."

"You shouldn't have bluffed last night, Marty."

"Aaa, I thought Vonny was bluffing. I only lost twelve hundred."

"Marty?"

"Yeh?"

"As your partner I think we should go back to our old agreement."

"How was that?"

"Fifty-fifty in everything. We'll share the winnings or losses in poker too."

"No fun having to be on the watch for signals."

"No signals. We just split what we take when we play poker."

"All right."

"The drinking place's that big cabin near the fort's sally port," said Dake, snapping the huge lock on the cabin door.

Janner tightened the India-rubber poncho about his wide shoulders, looking at the water-pooled bog of steep ground they must negotiate to reach the gates of the fort.

Dake plunged through the blinding down-pour and Janner followed the sure-footed hulk of his partner.

They pushed past the door of the low-raftered cabin and moved toward the glow of the huge potbellied stove.

"What'll it be?" asked the bearded, rocky thin man behind the plank bar.

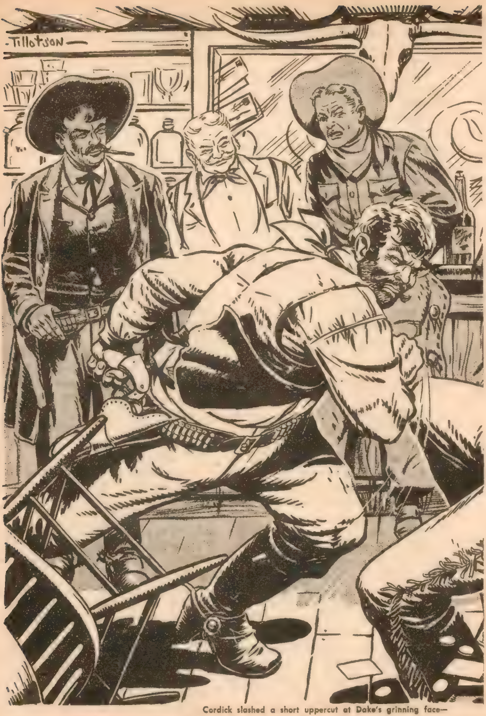
Dake laughed. "We got a choice?"

"Sure. Whiskey with water or whiskey without water."

"Save the water for your feet."

The bearded barkeep sloshed a yellowish liquid into tumblers and the two friends downed them gratefully, Dake placing a five dollar gold piece in payment on the bar.

The hiss and tear of rain from the opening door brought a few braces of eyes around.



Cordick slashed a short uppercut at Dake's grinning face—

"Hullo Arney," greeted the bartender.

"Glassful, Freddy," said Cordick.

"Have one with me," offered Dake.

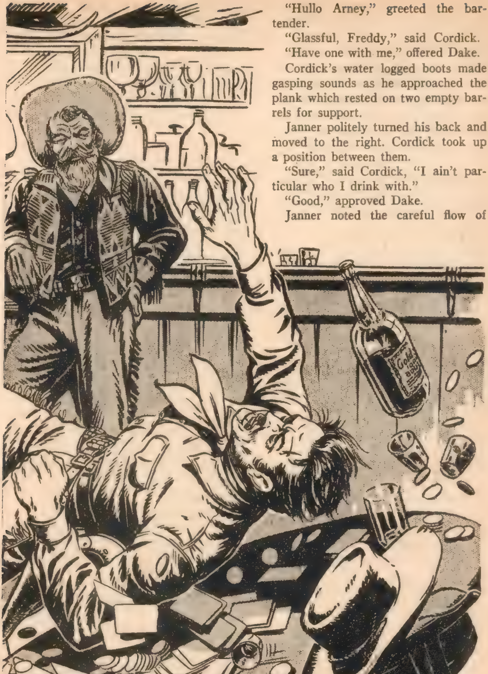
Cordick's water logged boots made gasping sounds as he approached the plank which rested on two empty barrels for support.

Janner politely turned his back and moved to the right. Cordick took up a position between them.

"Sure," said Cordick, "I ain't particular who I drink with."

"Good," approved Dake.

Janner noted the careful flow of



a blow which knocked him back and wiped the grin from him.

conversation which passed between the other six men in the room.

Cordick downed the drink with one long swallow. He sighed manfully, knuckling tears from his eyelids with his hairy hands. "Now, Dake," he said with rough geniality. "I ain't a hard man to deal with. Why don't you git smart and stay away from my trade."

"I don't drag 'em to my shack, Arney."

"Mebbe. But if I git riled I kin take you with fists, knives or guns." Cordick laughed. "Now ain't that right, kid?"

Janner moved toward the stove, removing the thick poncho. He placed it on a nail near at hand. The men in the room were laughing. That joke hadn't been worth the exertion.

Janner regarded his friend and the little round man. They both wore braces of Colts. They both were hot tempered.

"My back's still a little stiff from the rain, Arney," said Dake. "Maybe you can give me a little rub-down and then we'll talk business."

Cordick slashed a short upper-cut at Dake's grinning mouth, smashing him against the plank, tearing the wobbly board against the bartender.

This caused a loud enough sound to still the inane chatter of the now highly interested patrons.

Cordick waited for Dake to gain his feet then lashed out with boot and fist, making Dake scream with pain and rage. And again Dake went down. Cordick jigged toward the rolling Dake missing him by a hair's breath with his sharp heels.

Dake scrambled to his feet, blood colored his chin and cheeks. He darted for the smaller, heavier man and managed to swing two impotent haymakers against the bobbing grayish head before he was picked up and hurled against a toppled barrel.

SOMEONE in the room laughed. "DUNNO WHO MADE THE BIGGER NOISE. THET KID OR THE BARREL WHEN IT HIT THE WALL." Everybody laughed.

It didn't seem like Dake was going to get up.

"Mister," Cordick said not unkindly. "You wanted a little massager. You got it even with a little bleed-out. Next time I think you're going to get thet purty snot-box of yores rubbed down too."

Janner eyed his fallen comrade. For some reason Cordick hadn't recognized him or fallen for his ruse of pulling away from Dake when the ugly little trader had approached them.

"Hey, Cordick," called Janner.

The trader turned slowly. "Yeh?"

"You dropped your tobacco sack."

Cordick looked about the floor, stooped, came up with the little sack in his hand. He turned and left the room.

Freddy and Janner got Dake to his feet.

"Yo're lucky, younker," said a hefty, blue skinned man. "He usta step all over the pelts of men he knocked down."

"He tried," Dake said, shaking his head. "Now it's my turn."

"Shut up," snapped Janner, helping him with his poncho. "Come on, let's get back to the cabin."

They were breathless and mud splattered when their cabin hazed into view.

"Didn't I lock the door?" snarled Dake.

"Yes. Somebody else opened it."

They entered the protection of the sacked cabin. The table was toppled, the bed and mattress in disarray. The little cache was empty.

Dake turned livid with rage. He started for the door but Janner intercepted him nicely and swung him toward the cot.

"Cordick did this," Dake slobbered, spittle forming over the caked blood on his chin. "And you—damned friend you are—why didn't you cut him down?"

"I had that idea, Marty, but I changed it."

For a moment Dake forgot his great losses. "Why?"

"Because there were six other men in that room who would have sided Cordick if I jumped him."

"Yeh, that's right. Now what in hell we goin' to trade with?" And Dake's rage settled down to the tangible in the form of blaspheming.

"What the blazes happened here?" asked the gruff voiced Cordick and they wheeled as one upon him.

Dake flicked his coat-tails back. "Go for yours, you wart, or I'll gut you where you stand."

"Now, boy," gentled Cordick. "I hadda hit yuh a little bit—I didn't stomp you none!"

Janner pushed Dake aside. "What do you want?" he asked evenly.

"Shucks, nothin', I reckon. I came here figurin' yuh boys would like to make some quick money."

"You came at the bloody right time," snarled Dake.

"Wal—if yuh ain't interested . . ."

"What?" snapped Janner.

"Maguay," said Cordick softly.

"How much?" said Dake.

"I got twenty gallons of it—and some first class tizwin, 'bout ten gallon of it."

"Customers?" asked Dake.

"Yeh, but I can't tote gallons 'round. They'd notice. *And* after our little fight nobody'd suspect you two of bein' in with me. Now don't thet make sense?"

"No," said Janner. "Don't like getting the Indians drunk and have them come down here and cut us to pieces."

Cordick chuckled. "Now, where did yuh get those ideas, boy? Indians get happy as hell on a few drops of it—and sleep for hours with a few swallows. They ain't never been any drunken Indians raidin' that I knows of and you kin ask anybody.

"They takes their likker an' runs off somewheres with it where nobody kin steal it from 'em and gets roarin'. Then they sleeps it off."

"HE'S right," said Dake. "How much is in it for us?"

"Wal, that depends. I'll give yuh boys a few gallons of tizwin to see how you make out. When you got a few jugs they pay big. . . And you, Marty, kin always say you won it gamblin' from some Injuns if you're caught. I won't tell nobody yuh got signs writ on the cards."

"Where's the drinking stuff?" rasped Dake.

"If the rain holds up 'til dark I'll bring it over." He turned to leave but paused long enough to say, "Sorry, 'bout those dam Comanch gettin' to yore stuff."

The two friends let it go.

"We still have fifty-four hundred in cash," said Janner. "Couldn't we buy some trading goods with that?"

"Sure," said Marty testily, "just go to the store . . . Billy, can't you understand that bartering material isn't worth money—it's worth fortunes. We'll have to sell that likker for Cordick."

"I know tizwin is fermented corn," said Janner. "But what's Maguay?"

"A plant, it makes mescal."

"Where did Cordick get it?"

Dake swore lustily. "I got beaten up, we get robbed and you ask dam fool questions. . . Go on, fix up something to eat, I'm starved."

"Jesus," said Janner, "all we're doing is cooking and eating."

Dake laughed. "Billy, we're going to be doing considerably more in a few days—"

"Hey ya fellers," came a call from out front, and the partners walked to the open doorway. It was a little old fellow with a great smile crackling his face. "Ya young fellers should see what th' new fort herder done brought wid 'im?"

"What?" said Janner dryly.

"His dautter—an' she's a peach—all real rosy and young," cackled the oldster, adding, "don't ever say Charley Caker nivver gave his enemy a fair chancet fer a gal."

They watched the loony trader run toward the fort.

"Let's fix the door," Janner said.

"I'm not as hungry as I thought," said Dake.

"And this place needs an airing."

"What color did he say her hair was. . . ."

The rain was subsiding to a chilling drizzle when they reached the lips of the fort. A group of twelve or fourteen men were standing in the depressing downpour.

"She's a hundred and forty pound beauty," said one youngish chap.

"Hundred and forty pounder!" exclaimed Dake. "Billy, that's the way I like 'em."

Charley Caker, the half-witted trader laughed shrilly. "Hey, pard," he called to Dake, "don't you think you'd better wash th' blood frum yer fangs first?"

Dake swiped a hand over his face. He decided to wait and see the beauty.

"Where is this frontier belle?" Janner said dryly.

"Wall" supplied Charley Caker, "I seed 'em when they passed my shack and I spread the word. Mebbe they is inside the fort."

"See you at the cabin," Janner told Dake.

"Fifty-fifty, remember, pard? I like women. I want to add to my dreams."

"You're bad enough for a cabin mate as it is, hog-foot," leered Janner. "How'n hell will I sleep with you sneezing and choking with lung fever?"

"Shut up," growled Dake. "Let's go inside. My friends are in there. I'll have the medico dress my cuts and we'll have Canzone or Screenman introduce us."

"Anything's better than standing out in the rain," Janner said, following the stiff-shouldered Dake past the grinning sentries.

THE medical clinic was a scrubbed barracks of some forty feet in length.

"Doc," said Dake. "I'd like to present my best friend: Billy Janner."

The doctor held out his hand and Janner shook it. He was a bald, clean-shaven middle aged man with a deep, soothing voice. He didn't have a visible hair on his head.

"Well sit down, Mr. Dake," said the army surgeon, "and I'll treat those bruises."

Dake sat down. "Doc, did you see that new herder's daughter?"

"Yes. Bures, I believe, is their name. She is quite attractive."

"They staying—mean are they living inside the fort?"

"Yes, they'll stay in the old herder's cabin."

The doctor deftly slipped a few patchs of corn plaster over the more conspicuous lacerations. "All right, young man," he said, "you're ready for some other fellow now."

Dake smiled broadly. "You should see his knuckles, doc, bet he'll suck 'em for a week."

The medico chuckled approvingly and they took their leave of him.

Janner looked up the straight, wide leveled path which separated the box-like structures within the confines of the fort. "Well, Marty," he said, "she's in one of these buildings or are you going to start yelling for her?"

Dake's face clouded. "I haven't seen a white girl in four-five months. C'mon. . . ."

Lt. Screenman was shaving when they pushed past his door. He waved to them and continued to zip the straight razor down his slender jaw-line.

"Seen the Bures, Ed?" asked Dake.

"Yes."

"Did Vonny or Vito get to her yet?"

Screenman rinsed his face. "Boys," he said gently, "Clara is a very nice woman. Her father is a very stern, ugly tempered man."

Dake beamed. "Fine. I have a taste for unsullied damsels."

Screenman smiled. "Clara's little girl doesn't take after her grandpa."

"Child?" croaked Dake.

"That goes for every last man in the fort," Screenman said flatly.

"Now let's go fix that door," Janner said, grinning.

It was a long silent march through muddied paths back to their cabin. Janner respectfully kept a tactful quiet upon the wiles of women while Dake confined himself to an occasional vengeful oath against husbands in general.

The rain had stopped but water and pebbles strewed the floor of their hut.

"Gawd," avowed Dake, "now you want to drown us."

"I thought we propped that door up when we left—left to *see* the hundred-and-forty gal," said Janner disgustedly.

The voice from the cabin startled them. "Come on in, boys; it's me, Arney."

They quickly entered and propped the door up.

Arney pointed to their little secret storeroom. Crocks were visible. "While everybody wus gettin' excited over the little lady I was carting the tizwin here. There's ten gallon there."

"I'll give you twenty dollars for each gallon," Dake said with the detached tone of a man trying to keep his temper in check.

"Now boys, that ain't fittin'. I got th' stuff. Hell yuh kin get a pony a crock—or more—from the Injuns."

"What do you want for them?" Janner said.

"Wall, good ponies bring good prices, sometimes a thousand a head. You know that Dake."

"Give you a hundred per crock," said Dake.

"Naaa. We split what yuh git up there. That's fair. I don't want yuh boys to mebbe lose money. I like young fellers to make good."

"Like hell you do," snapped Dake. "Two hundred a crock."

"How much yuh boys got?"

"Twenty five hundred."

"Now don't lie. I'm old enough to be yore old father. . . Come on, boys, take my deal. I risked my neck already!"

"We'll bring you twenty five hundred in cash in a little while."

"Three thousand and it's all yores."

"We only got twenty-five hundred left," said Dake.

"Then take my deal—it's fair. We split."

"Get those gallons out of here," ordered Janner.

"Now, boys, if twenty-five hundred is all yuh got I'll take it. I'm not a greedy man."

"We'll bring it to you," said Dake.

"Now—"

"Get out of here," rasped Dake, "my word is good."

"I'll wait for yuh Dake; I'll wait an hour for my money. I'll be in my cabin." He turned and crossed the room with long strides. He turned when he reached the doorway. "We'll git along right fine."

When nobody answered him he went down the path.

"That leaves us with twenty-nine hundred," said Janner, after the room had been cleaned and mopped. The door stoutly flapped within the restraining grip of its repaired leather hinges.

"Yeh," mumbled Dake.

"How're we going to reach the Indians?"

"I got my ways."

"All right, bring the money to Cordick."

"All right."

"All right, bring the money to Cordick."

Then a distant rumbling was audible.

"More blasted rain," said Janner.

DAKE'S face slowly chubbied into a smile. He unlatched the hook, swung open the door. The pleasant breezes following a mountain rain swept through the cabin.

Dake ran down a stray lock of his hair with his hand and swept it back into the central matting of his hair. His smile had lengthened into a leer of anticipation.

"Those are gambling drums, Billy," he said. "Gambling drums."

"That mean anything to us, Marty?"

"Yea—yes. We're going to follow those drums. A big game is going to be held somewhere. Money and expensive things will be around. We'll make our killing tonight with the tizwin."

Janner said very quietly, "Do the Indians want whites at their games?"

"They know me."

"We're going to barter and sell, not gamble, Marty."

"Yea—sure."

"I mean it, Marty. We're near broke."

"All right."

"Give me your word, no gambling."

"You got it."

"I'll go get my pony. It's with the cavalry horses at the fort." Janner rose. "When do we start?"

"Soon's you're ready."

"Are those high Indian drums, Marty?"

"No. Kiowa, I'd say. Some of 'em have their camps stretched five or six miles from here. The chief has his drum-man beat out the gambling signals when he's ready for a big game of any kind."

"Got an extra pistol, Marty?"

"There's a Colt and holster in the bag on the wall."

"Those are nice Colts you're carrying, Marty."

Dake lifted the two bone-handled Colts from his holsters. "Yeh, they're pretty. But I never felt much like practising the quick draw. They're balanced nice."

"Better go give Cordick his money—but quick."

"Yeh." Marty headed for the open door. . . He listened to the slither of the drum-beats in the clear, crisp air. . . "Ain't that the prettiest sound you ever heard, Billy?"

"Yes," said Janner. "Like a screaming crazy woman."

CHAPTER VI

IT WAS darking and misting when they clucked their ponies into movement toward the throb of the drums.

There wasn't a tell-tale chinking of crockery from the burlap sacks tied to the rumps of their mounts. They had carefully padded the spaces between the jugs.

They paused briefly before attempting to cross the Guadalope. The quiver of the ceaseless tomtoming seemed closer. They sprayed up onto the opposite bank without a backward glance.

Then they galloped across the broad Indian trail which hummed with the rain drippings.

"They're Kiowas," said Dake. "C'mon." He trotted his horse across the pulpy water thickened ground to the main lodge. It was a small Indian camp with twelve or fifteen smaller cones shadowing the excited braves milling about the tepees.

Dake raised his right palm. "Traders—friends—*tizwin.*"

They broke out their smiles and cheers, forcing Dake and Janner to dismount in order to better protect their precious stores.

They led their ponies to the chief's lodge. A brave ducked into the large tepee constructed of buffalo hides, emerged with an erect, tall, proud visaged Indian clothed in white man's striped trousers, moccasins, a top hat and blanket.

"Soft Wind welcomes you," said the chief in broken English. "Me see White Father."

"He's been to Washington," Dake explained to Janner. "Soft Wind is sort of a good will agent for the War department."

"Me get eight hundred dollar a year," proclaimed the chieftain proudly.

They showed the proper appreciative faces, and the chieftain motioned for them to enter his lodge.

Dake pointed to the sacks. "We got tizwin, heap much, ten gallon."

"Me got six ponies, twelve mules," said the Kiowa chief.

Dake shook his head sadly. "Tizwin worth heap more."

The chief frowned—but in the distance there came the sound of approaching riders. The lips of the salaried chieftain quivered. "Me got money too—heap much."

"Get it."

The Indian did, showing the traders three pouches containing ten dollar gold pieces.

"About two thousand's in the bags," said Dake to Janner.

The beat of the approaching riders forced the chieftain to look anxiously toward the river.

"The ponies and mules too," said Dake.

The Indian nodded. "Give tizwin."

The partners unloaded the jugs in jig time. The herd of ponies and mules were quickly gathered and yelled toward the river.

"It ain't far to the fort," Dake said excitedly.

"He was sure quick to give us all he had, Marty."

"Sure. . . . He didn't want any of the other Indians to bid against him. They were coming to his lodge for the gambling session."

"Maybe we could have got more."

"No. He's rich and he won't send his braves out to take back his herd. C'mon."

They were goading the ponies to splash the Guadalope when the water sprayed with bullets and Dake pitched from the saddle.

Janner charged his pony toward the fallen Dake. The skying screams of the attacking blurs frightened the ponies and mules to wildly plunge into the water sending gigantic spouts of water from the black spill of the river.

Janner dived from the saddle as his pony screamed and crumbled. He rolled clear of the hairy dead animal, skidding across the muddy river bank.

WHEN Janner opened his eyes he remembered Soft Wind's eagerness to give everything he had for the tizwin. The driving of the small herd and the shots. It'd happened that quickly.

Marty!

He tried to get to his feet, slipped on the oozing mud and fell on his face. His mud-caked eyelids received some of the cooling river water and he stumbled along the river bed, crying softly for Marty.

"Here," came the tearing sound of a voice in reply to his whispered calls.

"Don't mind me," sobbed Marty. "I think I'm through."

"Where?"

"Near heart."

"Got to move you—hear the thunder—more rain rolling this way."

"No, please, Billy. Please, get outa here. I'm dying." His voice failed him. He husked, "My whole left side is caved in."

"Shut up," snarled Janner. "We ain't got any horses. They shot mine and yours stampeded."

Lightning flashed and crayoned the skies a violent orange. "Oh my God," shrilled Marty and fainted.

"Lucky we got our ponchos," thought Janner, as he very gently tried to move Dake. But the man was a dead weight and forty pounds heavier than the ex-convict.

"God in heaven," Janner said desperately. . . But the rains were due any second. He couldn't leave Dake alone on the slush of watered earth unprotected from the rain. He didn't dare to make an attempt to reach the fort for aid.

Dake screamed with pain and Janner tried to soothe him.

"Billy," wheezed Dake, "quick, get some straight sticks—'bout chest high—quick, Billy for God's sake get the sticks."

Janner scrambled to his feet, peering into the darkness. A bolt of lightning crashed nearby sparking the scene with blinding light. He headed for the fringe of thickets away from the river bed.

The high wind had tore a swath through the groves leaving the hard lengths of stick-like proportions strewn about the steaming area.

It started to rain; he ran toward his friend with an armful of the required sticks.

"Put the sticks in the ground," Dake said thickly, trying to keep the fear and pain from his voice. "Put 'em in a circle—cross the sticks at the top, like an Indian tepee . . . Quick, the rain's getting heavier."

Janner worked feverishly, the sharp sticks ripping into his palms and fingers. Then the job was complete.

"Put your poncho over the sticks," Dake husked tearfully, biting deeply into his lip.

Janner firmly spread and fixed the broad India-rubber poncho over the frame-work of crossed sticks.

"Put my hat over the top," commanded Dake weakly, "that'll keep the rain from coming in from above."

Janner aided the crawling Dake and soon the blue-faced, wounded man was under the protecting folds of the poncho.

Janner lit a match, examined the

wound. The bullet had ripped dangerously close, yet below Dake's heart. Bits of the soft rubber of Dake's poncho were embedded into his open flesh.

"What can I do?" asked Janner.

"Nothin'."

"Rest. I'll head for the fort. Should make it in a couple of hours. I'll bring a wagon to pick you up."

"I won't be alive, Billy."

"Keep quiet, don't talk."

The wounded man's painful breathing forced Janner to inhale great gulps of the cold air. It was snug in there but the water was beginning to seep into the ground on which they lay. Janner could do nothing about that.

"I'll be back for you," Janner said.

"No-o. Don't leave me."

"For God's sake, Marty, don't talk. Try to sleep."

"Kill me, Billy."

....

"Billy, dammit, kill me."

"No."

"I'd do it for you. I'm through, put me outa my misery." He choked, coughed. His face sweaty and visible while the skies were lighted by jagged bursts of lightning.

"Marty . . . Listen: You ain't a coward. Rest easy."

"For God's sake, Billy. Please." The man caught a strength from some hidden source. "Billy, we promised back in the orphanage that we'd do anything for each other. Remember?"

"I won't kill you. Come on, your guts ain't rotted, think like a man."

"I am. I don't want to suffer no more. Put me out."

"No."

The somewhat pudgy hands of Dake tightened with babyish tautness upon Janner's hands. "Please. Please."

"All right," said Janner. "You said you'd do anything for me, didn't you?"

The hands tightened, the nails ripping into Janner's hands.

"You know I'd do it if it was you, Billy."

"No. I said you'd do anything for me. I will for you. But I'm asking you to do something for me now. You got to live for me. We're going to be important, wealthy."

"No," weakly.

"Then dammit, I won't put a bullet through your head."

Dake's head slowly sagged forward. Janner waited with his breath spilling from his gaping mouth.

Then the head came up with tortured slowness, completing the nod of ascent. A smile weakened the tough set of Dake's lips.

"Helluva friend ya are," Dake said painfully.

Janner left.

The rain was soaking the ground beneath and around Dake's burning body—the water scalding and chilling his body by turns.

He couldn't bear it any longer. Why hadn't Billy? Then when the pain reached the numbing degree his hand strayed to his side. He felt the hardness of the butt of his pistol. Billy hadn't taken them. Billy had forgotten.

"You can't expect a man to think of everything," Dake said as he slowly drew the pistol.

He placed the bore of the pistol into his mouth and squeezed the trigger.

CHAPTER VII

THE Guadalope was crossed. The Indian trail was easy enough to follow but rocks and mud deviled every step of Janner's journey as did the rain.

He was at least an hour's walk from the fort now and Janner tried to pace himself. But the plunge from the pony, the icy crossing of the river and winds plus his thoroughly soaked clothes made every step a torture.

He kept his legs moving through the darkness. The rain was slackening in its intensity.

He was resting under an overhanging ledge when the thought suddenly took hold of him. *Marty could easily enough kill himself*. . . But he could do nothing about that. It was too late to turn back.

He was a sobbing, trembling mass of tortured muscle when he fell against the door of the first cabin that swam in sight.

Charley Caker was too startled to say anything. He dragged Janner into his hut and tried to slap him into consciousness.

Janner mumbled, "Marty's shot—hurt bad—by the river. I made a little tepee with my poncho. Send a wagon. Lift him easy."

Caker's imbecility disappeared for a moment. "Who shot 'im?"

"Blast ya," guttered Janner, getting to his feet, pushed Caker toward the door. "Go to the fort, get a wagon. I'll show them where he is. Hurry up you old pig."

"Pig! Ya young—"

"Tell 'em to bring the wagon here." Janner's snarling face and clenched fists sufficed for an apology to the old locoed trader. He darted out past the door.

The time passed swiftly for Janner. He had fallen into a heavy sleep. The heavy hands that jarred him to wakefulness also stirred his memory. He told Lt. Screenman of the attack and of Dake's condition.

"Wagon's outside," said Screenman. "Indians?"

"Don't know."

"No need to worry. The Captain has sent Lt. Canzone out with thirty men."

A heavy coat was handed to Janner and he climbed onto the seat of the light wagon. The stiff faced man behind the reins whipped the horses into sudden movement.

"There it is!" Janner pointed to the cone on the other bank. "I made it to protect Marty from the rain."

The army surgeon splashed his mount into the river.

"We can't get the wagon acrost," said the driver of the wagon.

Janner felt his pulse quicken.

Lt. Screenman reined in close to the wagon. "Jump on," he said to Janner, "we'll go across." He gave Janner a friendly grin. "Doc Swint's one of the best. If there's a chance you couldn't find a better medico."

The doctor's lantern illuminated the tiny tepee. Brightly tinted water soaked the inch level of water about Dake's body. His fingers were clenched over the butt and trigger of his Colt.

The doctor rose. "He's alive," he said, his tone not presuming anything untoward. "You men, quick signal for the litter. We'll have to bring him to the hospital at the fort immediately."

Janner stopped thinking. He stooped over his friend's body and gently pried the pistol from his stiff fingers. He checked the cartridges. None of them had been fired.

Janner tried to fire the gun. It wouldn't discharge. The water had rendered the pistol useless.

"Somebody did watch over you," Janner murmured, jamming the pistol into his belt. "Thank God."

Screenman said, "He sure was aiming to take a few of those cusses with him."

"Yes," said Janner. "He had to protect himself, I reckon."

THE litter was brought from the wagon and three troopers carefully negotiated the river at this low crossing point. He was gently placed on the bed of the wagon and they headed for the fort.

"Easy, Bures," ordered the medico, "don't try to hurry."

Janner snapped a glance at Bures. He sure looked like an ugly customer. But that only reminded Janner of Marty's boyish enthusiasm for Clara Bures.

"How bad is it, doc?" said Janner.

The army surgeon didn't reply. Janner didn't repeat the question.

They gently lowered Dake's twitching body from the wagon and carried him into the hospital.

"You too," said the doctor, motioning Janner into the hospital.

"Me?"

"Yes. You're shivering. I'll look you over."

Janner went into the big room.

The medico gave him a drink of brandy and told him to stay close to the stove, then hurried over to the form of Dake which was stretched out on the long operating table.

The doctor went to work while his assistants efficiently answered to his every command . . .

Janner drowsily watched the doctor approach the stove. "Feeling better, young man?"

"Guess so."

"You aren't shivering any more."

"How's Marty?"

"God only knows."

"Doc!"

"Son, a doctor doesn't know very much about a man's insides. Dake had some of his bulleted out. It's a nasty wound, below the heart, smashed several ribs. I don't think it's infected. I believe we were in time."

"Then he has a chance?"

"Certainly." The doctor smiled knowingly. "I realize you two are fast friends but you better get some rest. You don't want to have your partner come back to a bankrupt business, do you?"

Janner said no, thanked the doctor and pushed out into the night. No, they weren't bankrupt, but they sure as hell had little enough with which to build up their trading operations.

The sound of hoof-plates made him stop.

Lt. Canzone and his troopers were swinging through the gate. Janner yelled to the lieutenant, "Did you get them?"

"No. The Indians on the other side were having a big gambling session and feast—pretty drunk too. They didn't even know what the hell we were talking about. It was probably some white renegades passing through. You were unlucky enough to be within striking distance of them."

"Yeah," said Janner, walking through the tiny door set in the large swinging gates. Everything was crystal clear now. There was always the possibility of desperados. But it had happened very slickly.

Cordick. Rage consumed the thin ex-convict. It had been that hairy devil. . . .

No light shown through the chinks of Cordick's large cabin. He stood before the door. No sound emitted from the dark interior. His arms brushed against the door and gave a little. He pushed past it.

"Cordick," he called. There was no reply.

He went to the table and his hands finally bumped against the lantern. He lit it.

The room was in disorder. Janner pulled the hide of a buffalo skin which served as a curtain to another room. He brought the lamp into it and saw the partly filled cases of stores and the spillings of flour, sugar and salt. This had been his storeroom.

"So you pulled out," Janner said. He felt strangely cool and unangered. Everything was very obvious now. Cordick had sent some of his friends to follow them. When they had tried to cross the river they had been picked off. Cordick had probably heard of Janner's return from the river and got out.

Justice was swift out here.

"Only," thought Janner. "How could I have openly accused Cordick. We had traded that damned tizwin to the Indians" . . .

He blew out the light in the lamp and stepped outdoors. Perhaps he and Cordick would meet again somewhere. He thought about that for a long while.

CHAPTER VIII

ARNETT Cordick rode hard that night. He was putting as much distance between himself and the Guadalope outpost as he could. He had approximately thirty thousand in gold jammed into his saddle bags. He was heading for home with it.

His mates had bungled the job. That annoyed him, but they were appeased and headed for distant parts as he now was.

"Indian trading, blast it!" growled Cordick. He'd hated every minute of it. But now that he had his stake he was heading for New Braunfels.

He thought of ma and his kid brother Tommy; but he was a conscientious man where his safety was concerned. If he ever met Dake or Janner again he'd have to do some mighty powerful explaining. But that could easily enough be handled.

As the early twining of dawn made a place in the sky for light he lead his pony into a deep gorge and ate some bread and cheese. Sleep pricked at his eyelids but he didn't dare stop. Yep, he had finally made it. He was going home a rich man. He'd open some business and give ma and Tommy what they deserved.

He wondered if Tommy still played the piano. . , .

New Braunfels was a moderately large village. Cordick knew that his family had always intended moving to the large, safer city of San Antonio, but had no way of knowing whether they had done so or not during his six year absence.

There were no welcoming smiles. He knew he had changed. He was prematurely gray and didn't look his thirty-five years.

"Tommy's eighteen or nineteen now," he thought, grinning. He had always been fond of the little dark haired kid. He remembered all of those endearing little incidents that older brothers sometimes brought about.

The way Tommy would try to ape his walk and speech. The missing boots and pants which were usually found tucked under little Tommy's cot.

Cordick laughed aloud and a bearded old man stared at him. But Cordick beamed at the oldster and automatically the old man waved a friendly greeting.

"Good to be back home," he said to himself.

There. The house had not changed. The rough logging had been patched and the roof looked a little different. But there was that old tree and there was the smoke shooting from the chimney.

Cordick dismounted, hoisted the heavy saddle bags across his shoulders, and went to the door. He kicked against the firry boards of the door.

"What the hell?" snorted Cordick. "Open up—it's me—I'm home!"

Then he heard the music. It was a beautifully bright piece—slow—and it didn't sound too mixed up to him. It must have been a beautiful piece.

He dropped one of the heavy bags and the chinking of the coins made him grin proudly. He rapped with bruising force against the door.

The music stopped and the door swung inward.

"Arney!" cried the boy.

They embraced but very briefly. Cordick stooped to pick up the heavy bag, and carried them into the house.

"Lock the door, Tommy. Where's ma?"

"Arney I—she" . . .

The grin died a natural death on Cordick's face. "Ma dead?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Three years ago. She was sick for a short time. She didn't suffer very much."

Arney studied his white faced, long fingered brother. The black hair was closely cropped, the shoulders were thin yet wide. The eyes were bright and large. He wanted to wipe away the misery that dully gleamed from those brown eyes.

"Well, anyhow, Tommy now you kin go to San Antonio and get some real pee-anno lessons."

"I did, Arney."

"Yeh? Good. Now yo're a regular pee-annist."

"Uh-no. You see I play to amuse myself. It's . . ."

"What?" Come on, Tommy. But wait, look at this!" One of the money bags was opened and Tommy's eyes fastened upon the cascading gold pieces.

"Take as much as yuh want," Arney said proudly.

Tommy smiled. "Guess I can send for some books and—" Tommy paused thoughtfully—"and get what I want I guess."

"What were yuh goin' to say?"

"Nothing. How'd you get the money, Arney?"

"Indian trading. Great business, Tommy."

"You're not going to leave again, are you?"

"No. Open some business here. An hon, err, real business."

"There isn't much here, Arney."

CORDICK ignored his brother's remark. He crossed the room, touching the round table, this chair then that one. The little clay bowl that ma always had filled with flowers. He stopped before the cheap upright piano.

On the music rack stood an open sheaf of neatly lined music paper with an interesting title. Arney slowly made out the initialing: A-N-B-E-L-L-A W-H-I-R-L.

"Hey, Tommy," he said, "was this what you was playin' when I came?"

"Yes," smiled Tommy, running his nervous fingers through his hair. "I composed it."

"Wal play Annie's dance agin for me, Tommy. It's purty as hell."

Tommy sat at the key-board and deftly, if a bit over loudly, applied an over-bearing technique to the tuneable piece.

"Lord," said Arney when the piece had been played, "that's beautiful. Play it agin—I want to hear as much as you can play."

Tommy laughed, complying. This time he rendered it with his foot jammed down over the sound pedals, giving it all of the melodramatic appeal which he thought his brother would enjoy.

"I'll be damned," vowed Arney. "Yuh play better'n thet their Yellow

Bill feller in Grace's Place in Montana."

Tommy couldn't check the laugh. "You know I've studied. Ma give me the money in the beginning. After she died I took in music students." Tommy's face twisted bitterly. "They're girls of course."

"Thet's nice," Arney said, grinning broadly.

"Not to other fellows' way of thinking."

"Anybody botherin' yuh?" Arney growled.

"No—no. I can take care of myself."

"Yuh jus' take care of them hands. I'll take care of the rest. Now tell me everything."

"Honest, Arney, nobody's picking on me."

Arney grinned, gently patting the hard shoulder of his kid brother. "Yuh always was a stubborn cuss. I'll be gettin' down to the saloon. I need a drink."

Tommy's face tightened but he didn't say a word. Arney waved to him and went out the door with a fine swinging step. He was happy. Tommy was the best piano player in the west—maybe the whole world—and he was his brother.

HE STEPPED into the good sized cabin with the saloon sign out in front. He looked it over carefully. He liked it. It was clean and a good stock of liquor gleamed from the shelves behind the bar.

"Always wanted to own a saloon," he thought.

There were six men in the saloon. The tall, well built, clean shaven man leaning against the bar eyed him briefly then turned his back on him.

Arney recognized no one in the room, he stepped to the bar. "Whiskey," he ordered.

The slack faced bartender filled and placed a glass before him. Arney downed it. Nobody was paying any attention to him.

"I'm Tommy Cordick's brother," he announced loudly, and smilingly awaited their greetings.

The clean shaven man at the other end of the bar turned slightly, a teasing smile on his face.

Cordick didn't like that. "What happened to Tim Leopon and Jimmy Hartner?" he asked.

"I just bought into this place," said the well barbered one, moving toward Arney Cordick.

Arney showed the man his most disarming smile. "Wal, yo're the man I'd like to speak to."

The man flipped back his coat-tails and slowly scratched the small of his back. He wore black butted colts. "My name's Lew Dock. Go 'head an' talk." Dock's smile had faded to a light angry twitching.

Arney refreshened his smile with his deepest most assuring tone. "I think you don't understand, friend."

"Don't know what a brother of a yellow bellied piano player wants with *me*."

"I jus' wanted to 'quire if this here saloon was for sale."

"Then you better learn how to say things," snapped Dock.

Arney grinned, walked toward Dock. When he reached within normal speaking distance of the man he lashed out with the back of his big, hard left hand. The dirty knuckles smashed against the bridge of the saloon proprietor's nose.

Dock fell backward, his hand blurring toward his gun. Arney who had his balance smoothly drew and fired four bullets into Dock's chest before the man thudded against the bar and smashed to the floor. His boots made scraping sounds as they straightened against the rough planking of the floor.

"He insulted my brother," Arney said to the men in the room, the colt still in his hand.

"We heard an' saw," said the bartender good naturedly, "an' we're mightful thankful."

"You shore got a tough man," said a lank string-bean, moving toward Arney and extending his hand toward him.

"Drinks on me," said Arney, and the men in the room warmed up to the homecomer.

"Say," said Arney with great tonal charm, "is there any other fellers 'round who bother my kid brother?"

"No," said the lanky man named Fetters.

"Wal, then, who kin I buy this place from?"

The bartender laughed. "Mister Cordick, I hadda sell Dock a half interest—at fifty dollars—my asking price is fifteen hundred countin' the stock you see."

"What's in back?"

"A thousand dollars worth of good whiskey."

"I'll bring over the twenty-five hundred in a little while."

The bartender laughed loudly. "Drinks on me, boys."

Young Sol Terrant tripped over the leg of Lew Dock as he headed for the bar.

Arney caught the youth before he would topple against the bar. "Better watch where yo're goin', son," he advised.

Terrant looked down at Dock. "He said somethin' like that, didn't he say that?"

"Yeh," said Cordick, "only he didn't take his own advice."

CHAPTER IX

CLARA BURES never had been happier in her eighteen years of existence. She propped up her handsome patient on the pillows.

"How is Mr. Dake this morning?" she asked.

"Call me Marty."

"So you're feeling better?"

"Yep." He smiled. "Why didn't you tell me before that your husband's dead?"

"Because the wrong kind of man would annoy me."

"All right, you win. How's Sue this morning?"

Clara Bures sternly eyed her patient. "What have you been giving her? She told me to give you a great big kiss for her."

Dake smiled innocently. "Me?"

"Yes, you," she laughed.

He reached for her hand but she moved from range. "I'll die before noon," he said miserably. "Bet you'd get a lot of fun out of scalping me." He moaned terribly and ducked his head downward.

She cried out softly and went to his side. She didn't try to evade his hands.

"Clara, I love you. Dammit, don't pull away."

"Mister Dake, this is a clean frock."

"You saw me wash my hands."

She felt strangely elated; she tested his lips. They indeed were feverish. "Now may I go?" she said softly.

"Yes—sure. You mad?"

"Dogs get mad."

"Like your new job?"

She gently extracted her fingers from his hand. "It's better than doing nothing in the cabin."

"It's a wonder that your father allows you to act as a nurse," Dake said gloomily.

"I get ten dollars a month."

"I'll give you a thousand."

Her face flushed. "That's what I get for being kind to you," she snapped prettily.

"Well, ma'am, that kind of charity is mighty lacking."

On impulse she swooped over him and planted a fine kiss on his forehead. She didn't try to talk because she knew what her voice would sound like. Marty didn't have anything to say. . . .

"Clara." The voice startled them.

"Papa—I" . . . .

"I got eyes. Get home."

Clara ran from the room. The old man stared at Dake for an indeterminate period of time. He said:

"If you weren't a sick man I'd kill you."

Marty didn't reply. He believed him.

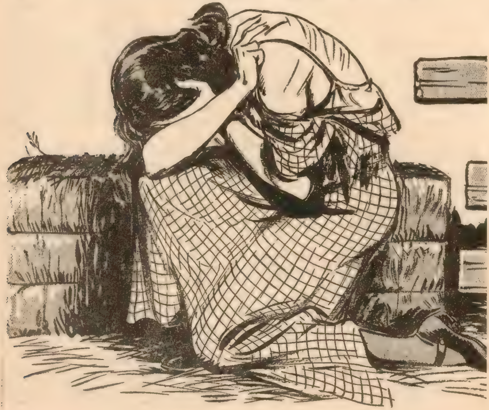
Janner watched the shambling approach of Charley Caker.

"Hey, Billy," crowed the oldster excitedly, "yer side-kick told me to come and tell ya to get over to the Bures's cabin right away."

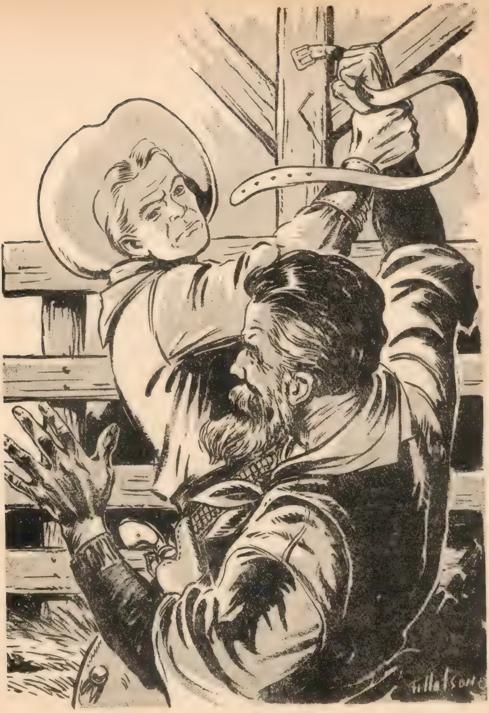
"What happened?" He didn't want to leave the few trading articles unprotected.

"He said it's about Clara—and fer ya to hurry up!"

"You watch the stuff here," said Janner, and he hurried off toward the fort. He didn't try to figure out the reason for Marty's hurried call for him to get to the Bures's shack. But he carried a vivid memory of old Bures's face and that was enough to



Janner grabbed the old man's arm, swinging him slowly around—



and prevented him from hitting the helpless, cringing girl.

hasten his steps into a run.

The hides at the windows of the cabin were parted to allow a cooling breeze. The tearing sound of leather meeting with flesh was enough to prod Janner into action. The low cries came from the stable behind the cabin. Janner dashed to the rear and quietly slid through the partly open door.

They hadn't noticed him. Bures had Clara by the arm, applying the thick belt with his powerful right arm.

"Don't—Papa," sobbed Clara, but the belt snaked upward for another lashing movement.

Janner moved swiftly, timing his action with a lithe leap. The slashing belt came toward her quivering back and Janner placed his palm between the lash and her miserably hunched shoulders.

The loud crack of the belt meeting his palm startled Bures to the extent that he released his hold on Clara and she fell to the straw littered filth of the ground.

BURES cursed harshly, but Janner's cool voice sliced through the fetid fumes of the stable. "It's too hot for exercise, Pop," he said tonelessly.

"You git—" The words faded in the old man's throat. He saw the indifferent smile on the face of the tall youth. Janner appeared to the old man: As slender as Jesus with the chill eyes of a Judas.

"Go fix your back," Janner said to the girl.

"She's my daughter," snarled the old man, taking a step toward her. Clara slid out of his reach over the crackling straw.

Janner grabbed the old man's arm, swinging him slowly around. Bures saw the candid ruthlessness in the brown, deep set eyes, and fear started to chug through his heaving chest.

Janner said, "I told you it was too hot for exercise—especially for an old man."

"She's my dau—"

—"No. She's eighteen, has a. kid She's her own boss."

Clara scrambled to her feet. "Leave my father alone."

"He has no right to beat you." Janner grimaced savagely—*that's what you got*—he felt the angry red fill his face. "You better find a place for yourself and the kid. Away from this old buzzard."

The old man seemed on the verge of an epileptic fit. The purplish skin about his cheek-bones bunched up in a devilish smile. "She ain't my daughter no more. She's bad. She married a no good drummer when she wus fifteen and went off with 'im. Then he died an' she came crowlin' back to me to take care of her and her kid.

"Wal, if thet's what she wants, she kin do what she wants. I'm a God fearin' man. I tried to do what's right but she jumps on any man thet takes her fancy. Yo're welcome to her."

"Papa," cried Clara. "I didn't—"

—"You never did nothing thet didn't bring trouble," snarled the old man. "Yuh git, have yore lovers take keer of ya"—the old voice lapsed into the ugliest language of a man who had been a herder all his life—"An' git thet bawling little punk outa my house."

Clara ran to her father but he pushed her roughly aside. Janner started for the door but the girl brushed past him as she beat him to the door. He watched her young, full figure disappear around the edge of the cabin.

A strange, hungry feeling stirred his deadened nerve centers. She was a girl to be wanted. But she was Marty's. He couldn't have her. There'd be plenty more some day.

On a hunch he peeked into the stable. The old man sat, huddled over, on a pile of logs. Deep choking sobs came from his throat.

Janner grinned ruefully as he made his way toward the hospital. There were two types of lashings: The mental and the physical. And to the person concerned the *other* was always the most bitter.

Marty's face was jaggedly streaked with perspiration. His voice was a strangled croak when he greeted Janner.

"What happened, Billy. Tell me everything."

Janner gave him a complete account.

"Oh my God. What'll I do now, Billy?"

"Marry her."

"I can't even get up from bed."

"She has to live someplace."

"She can move into our cabin," said Dake.

"Where'll I sleep?"

"Billy, listen, she's in trouble. Has a baby to look after."

"You tell her," said Janner. "I'll go over to Charley Caker's place. He's a little crazy but not stupid."

"What do you mean?"

"From your damned death-bed you cause trouble. For God's sake can't you do anything right?"

Dake sighed with relief. "All right, now you got that off your chest, go on—get Caker used to you."

Janner laughed tightly. "What kind of a trader is that crack-brain?"

Dake looked puzzled. "Dunno, guess he gets by somehow . . . Billy, if you see Clara tell her I got to see her."

Janner grimaced. "Don't worry, I won't tell her you sent me to *protect* her. I better catch Caker and tell him to keep his mouth shut."

"Yeah," said Dake, "and thanks."

Janner left the hospital. He headed for Caker's cabin.

Caker's old, bearded face crinkled happily when he spied the approaching Janner. He ran to him and grabbed him by the arm. "Billy boy. Ya come on inside and I'll talk to you."

Janner sighed and gently extracted the oldster's hands from about his forearms. "I got something to tell you too, old timer."

"Thet's right nice. Then we kin both talk to each other!"

"I've been waiting for something like this to happen all of my life," Janner said with exaggerated candor.

"Then come in, boy, but remember on'y one o' us kin talk at a time."

Janner nodded to that grim truth and said his words first.

The old man swore by his mother's memory that he would never tell anybody about the Clara incident. Then: "Shore, ya kin stay with me. Why didn't ya ask me afore? Yuh kin cook and mend the roof."

CHAPTER X

IT STARTED deep in Janner's stomach and slowly worked both ways. He reached the point where he didn't know it would next manifest itself. All he knew was that sometimes his body reminded him of it and sometimes his mind.

Girls . . . Always . . . Them . . . Always her face belonged to one of the bodies. It was starting to show. His hand wasn't as steady as he would have liked. His eyes watered suddenly and deep trembling seizures took hold of him at night and shook him as he slept.

He wanted to be with her. He couldn't bear the sight of Marty anymore. And sometimes he felt like grabbing at Clara's throat and digging his fingers deeply into that throbbing flesh.

"Go and help her out," Marty had asked.

He was going to help her out. He was going to see her. He couldn't help it.

He carefully washed and shaved. His body ached delicately as he pumped his legs quickly toward her cabin. Then from the strains and tracings of his past life he found relief. He could make himself forget, he knew. He could forget anything or everything. That was it.

Her brown hair was straight. Her dark eyes were level. The lines of the blue calico dress were straight. He didn't want that face to smile.

"Hello, Bill," she said pleasantly.

He nodded. "What do you want done today?"

"Ob nothing." Her lips started to pout. "You know you *don't* have to come and help me if you don't want to."

He had it and he rode it.

A beautiful, deep calm started to cool his nerve centers. He had it again!

"Clara, you're damned beautiful and you know it. Man'd be a damned fool not to fall in love with you."

Her lips parted and her eyes made the soft movement of her lips a gentle command.

But Janner dug in with jeweled spurs. She was going to feel it now.

"Well what is it?"

"Oh." Her face blanked as only a woman's face can.

He grinned. He couldn't help the words; they came out just right. 'That's all there is for you, Clara, maybe you should try and forget it for awhile. How's Sue?"

"The baby's fine."

He had her going up-hill now. He could feel the stickiness lard his body.

"*What* do you want done?" His voice was a beautiful rush of bored tonal quality. He was tearing in now.

Tears sparked her eyes. "Get out of here. Don't ever come back you—you convict."

He wasn't riding it anymore. He was feeling it. The spurs pained. The lard started to burn. He was in the fire now. At least she cared enough to hurt him.

"Then quit whining to Marty for help," snapped Janner. "Dammit, can't you leave a man alone?"

"I—I didn't bother him." Little girl now. What was she fishing for?

"So you want to talk?" taunted Janner. He'd never really been aware of these powers of a man before this moment.

Clara's eyes stilled. It was just that. The lashes made gradual, slow sweeping motions. "You hate me, don't you, Mr. Janner?"

"Yes, Mrs.—uh? What is the name?"

"Kovlac was his name." Her voice was coming from the juicy sections now. "Kovlac, you shaking, miserable pig. He was more man than you can ever make yourself believe there is. Now get out of here."

"Why did you say welcome, then?"

"I didn't."

"Some parts of a woman don't lie."

"I felt sorry for you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Clara, what do you live by? Is it body? Is it heart? Is it mood?"

"You don't talk like an Indian trader, Billy."

"No. I read that in a book once. I memorized it. I finally got a chance to use it."

"Then I'll tell you," she said, moving toward him, her hands fastening over his tough forearms. "The world is just a place to die in." Her voice started to slide downhill. "You either live like a saint, a rogue or a fool." Her voice broke and scattered to the very bottom. "You either love wisely *or* unwisely *or* you don't love at all."

"I'll be damned," said Janner. "You're smart."

"I started young."

"Did you make up those rules?" A little smile softened the question.

"No. Kovlac said that."

"Then let's break those rules. To hell with a place to die in, being a saint or a cringing fool. I want you, Clara. And now that I know you I don't want you spoiled anymore by somebody else."

"I'm sorry, Billy. I'm going to marry Marty as soon as he is well again."

JANNER wasn't riding it any more. He watched the face of the woman who rode every thought he dreamed of. He watched it plead with him to understand.

He slapped her face viciously, once, twice, then again and again.

She didn't cry.

"Thanks," she said, "now I have a reason to hate you."

He was thrown then. There was nothing under him. He wanted to get on his knees and say please and forgive me but there was a hardness to the passion that made the deep, damp hole of his stomach seethe suddenly.

"I'll tell Marty I gave you all the help you needed," Janner said. "You don't need me anymore. You said everything you didn't have the guts to say to Marty. You just want somebody."

He took her in his arms and, without warning, kissed her.

The cabin was a hot, brutally oppressing place. He turned toward the door.

"Billy?"

He had to turn.

"Are you sick to your stomach now?"

He nodded.

"That's what words do. I wanted you to kiss me because I was lonesome and wanted to feel the warmth of somebody who cared about me. Cared for every inch of me. Every inch, Billy. I can't help it. I'm like you. You ask for what you want. Are you ashamed to be told to come and get it—or did you come to torture me?"

"I came to tell you I loved you."

"You did."

"And now we're both sick to our stomachs," he said sadly, "I'll have a hell of a time trying to get to sleep tonight."

She went to him then and with all of her tenderness, softness of emotion and body. The scalding pain and abrupt eruption of jointed feelings mingled. They squandered their seconds. They didn't care.

"I love you," she said.

CHAPTER XI

NEW BRAUNFELS had a new hero. He was a swaggering, laughing, barrel chested devil who gave quarter to no man.

Tommy thrilled to every tale that came to his ears. *And he pistol-whipped Dobin. . . He dam near kicked Big Larry's lying head off! You shoulda seed Morrey eat grass, ha. . .*

They had a house-keeper now. She cooked and kept the place clean; and was smart enough to stay out of the men's way. She was the perfect housekeeper—big, ugly and dull witted. She adored the brothers as Tommy idolized his virile, cunning brother.

"How are things at the saloon?" Tommy asked, after one of Milly's fine repasts.

"Good." Arney chuckled. "I'm gettin' more business than the other two places."

Tommy nodded. "Fine. Now I won't have to teach those miserable little sprats any more."

"Sure," grinned Arney. "Now yuh kin practise an' play all yuh wants."

Tommy frowned. "Arney, the piano is a fine instrument. But I'm sick of making other people happy. Wherever I go it's Tommy play the piano. Tommy, play that piece I like."

Arney lit his black cigar, nodding in agreement. "Yuh jus' do what yuh like, Tommy. I'm proud of yuh, the best pee-anno player in the world."

Tommy laughed. "I thought I merely was the best in the west."

"You need confidence," Arney said savagely, "yuh kin be the *best* if yuh got the guts to keep snapping at it—never losing your *good hand*—you can't let up for one little minute, Tom, if yuh want to stay top dog."

"I don't want to be top dog, Arney. Dammit, I didn't want to study the piano. Ma made me when I was little. I was called a sissy and worse. I got my head nearly beaten off to prove otherwise. I just want to live. It's hell, knowing that you must practise five to six hours a day—every day."

"Sure it is, kid. Now play thet little Annie's Dance fer me. I'm goin' to learn how to whistle it, you watch."

Tommy shrugged and went to the piano. He never could refuse a person whom he knew to be his intellectual inferior. He hated them all for asking him to play.

He played brilliantly improvising upon his original composition until the room fairly quivered under the massive chords and bombastic style.

Arney watched the long, white powerful fingers ruffle the blacks and whites. He saw the sweat bead his brother's face. The hot intense eyes of the pianist who needn't struggle for a beautiful bridge or slowly maneuver a difficult technical passage.

Tommy was great, Arney knew, the boy's mind probably worked like a beautifully precisioned machine.

"Thanks," said Arney when Tommy put his numbed hands and wrists on the music rack of the piano for rest.

"I'll play at the saloon," Tommy said. "I don't want any pay."

"I told yuh before. No. And I meant it."

"I'm sick of sitting around the house."

"Take thet girl of yores riding."

"Yuh got a girl, ain't yuh?"

"Sure," bitterly.

"Don't she like pee-anno players?" Arney asked aggressively.

"Her father doesn't."

"Is thet right? What's his name?"

"Leave him alone; he's just like the rest. I don't make any money, I'm just something in pants and boots that really isn't."

Arney sprang from the chair. "I never thought yuh was yellow. Do yuh give a damn 'bout what ignornaters think?"

"I have to live here. . . That's the trouble, I like it here."

Arney patted the wiry shoulder. "Then ferget it. I gotta go now. Do yuh really want to come to the saloon?"

Tommy's stomach tightened with the joy of anticipation. He nodded.

"Come on," said Arney, "maybe thet's what you need—a couple of drinks."

Tommy laughed miserably. "I don't like liquor."

"Good! Who the hell likes a drunk?"

Tommy didn't attempt to answer

that question.

THE saloon was gay with laughter and jokes that were new and rib-tickling to Tommy. They all greeted him warmly. Not one ambiguous statement was thrown his way.

Two drunken men started to argue and soon were trading blows. The smaller of the two taking two solid punches to the chest and was jammed against the wall with the other swinging and connecting with the slack, gray face of the smaller man.

Arney grabbed the large one and spun him around; with one good powerful, curving swing he floored the man.

"Anybody who comes into my place," Cordick declared loudly, "is under my protection. Anyway he was smaller than you.

The man on the floor slid backward for awhile then scrambled to his feet; his face was a taut bloodless molding of hate. He said:

"Ye didn't give me a chance."

"Shore," drawled Arney. "I gave yuh a chance to crawl outa here."

The man swore, plunged toward the unmoving little round man. Arney accepted the blows of the taller man then swung a vicious round-house cutter to the man's forehead. He went down and didn't move.

Arney took a step forward and swung his foot back. *Tommy's here.* His boot toe scraped loudly against the rough floor boards as his boot toe stopped inches away from the fallen man's head.

"Drinks on the house," Arney bellowed, and with appreciative foul words the men crowded to the bar.

Tommy, tense and white faced with excitement, bumped against the bar. He needed a drink. He would have given five years of his life to have pulled off something like that. That's what made you a respected man. That —not stroking a keyboard.

"Give me another one," Tommy ordered, and the liquor bruised his throat again. Damned if I'll cough, he told himself, and he didn't.

Arney plowed through the two deep file of men near the bar and moved next to his brother. "My foot went to sleep all of a sudden," he said innocently.

Tommy didn't reply. The forty rod was settling warmly in his stomach. The shameless awe and pride that shone in Tommy's eyes forced his brother to give him a stinging comradely punch on the shoulder.

"Drink up, Tommy," Arney said hoarsely.

Arney had lawyer Miltspreen write to New York to invite Charles Mirraton to come to New Braunfels to hear a young genius.

A few weeks later Miltspreen dropped into Arney's saloon. "He's accepted the invitation," said the lawyer. "That's a great honor. Mr. Mirraton said he always wanted to come west for a visit."

"When'll he be here?"

"Two weeks or so. All depends."

So Mirraton was coming to hear him play. Tommy thought of it for a couple of days but couldn't work himself up over the idea. Damn Mirraton why didn't he stay in his big city? He wanted to be left alone.

But Arney was so pleased about it that he had made a pretty good display of happiness over the thing.

Tommy cried tears of rage over the keyboard as he practised. He wouldn't embarrass his brother by performing badly—or worse, with mediocrity—for the great Mirraton.

That night Tommy told his brother that he was going to run through the whole concert before Mirraton arrived. "And," concluded Tommy, "lawyer Miltspreen, the mayor, their wives and most everybody wants to hear it. I'll start at two tomorrow afternoon. Will you be here, Arney?"

"Sure." Arney smiled proudly. "We'll knock thet their big composer feller for a wide loop. We'll have 'im beggin' yuh to come to New York with 'im."

"I'll do my best," Tommy promised, happy for having made his brother pleased with him.

"Yuh always was the smart one of the family, Tom. Give 'em hell." He patted his shoulder. "Yore kind is better'n any other kind."

Tommy's young, serious face softened at the thoughts that his brother couldn't adequately word. "I'll sure try," he said grimly.

CHAPTER XII

CHARLES MIRRATON arrived. He had two, bearded, long haired, finely dressed gentlemen with him.

"Dreadfully tired," he announced to the welcoming committee. "Dreadfully tired."

And so the three peculiar characters were led to Ma Bigge's house and shown to the best rooms that the good woman could give to anyone.

"They're here," Arney shouted, slamming the door behind him.

Tommy twisted around on the piano stool. "Mirraton?"

"Yup."

Tommy got to his feet, but his brother waved him down. "He's sleeping now. But he told me he'd listen to you play tomorrow afternoon. Err, I told him to come around at three. All right?"

"Fine." Tommy listlessly ran his fingers over the keys, taking what melody his fingers could find.

"Yuh don't look too happy, Tommy?"

"Oh—no. I'm really elated. Guess it's a funny sensation having one of your dreams come true."

Arney beamed. "Wal, I gotta be gettin' back to th' saloon, don't trust thet bartender much. Get everything down right elegant, Tom."

Tommy heard the door close behind his brother. In desperation he tried to cheer his mind by playing some of his favorite selections. It didn't work. He was defeated—completely and utterly defeated. God, how he hated the piano. . . .

Mr. Mirraton with his cronies, and his booming voice were politely greeted by the surprised Tommy. It was only twelve o'clock.

"My boy," said Mr. Mirraton after he had introduced Mr. Skinzini and Mr. Mourn, "play for us. We love your little village and we love the beautiful freedom that unmolested space allows for one."

Tommy didn't know what the hell the dissipated maestro was popping off about but begged them to allow him to summon his brother who had been so kind and generous to him.

"Of course," granted Mirraton grandly, "music is for the masses, for the world, for hunter and general, for—"

"You'll excuse me," Tommy said, walking out into the hot air. Good Lord. . . He found a lad who would be only too glad to rush over to Arney's saloon and give him Tommy's message—and for five pennies!

Tommy re-entered the room and smiled at the gossiping men. He felt rather strange. He didn't like them, never would, and was tempted to make a botch of his recital.

"Ah what inspiration you must have," said Mr. Mirraton, gazing around the crudely furnished room and at the sky that was visible through the open windows.

"Yes," said Mr. Skinzini.

"But yes," said Mr. Mourn.

"Gentlemen," said Mr. Mirraton, "I do believe I would like to die out here. What more could a man ask?"

"What a harrowing thought," said Mr. Skinzini, smiling bravely. "But such beauty to it. I do hope I won't forget it. It's a brutal thought but there is so much nastiness to music—if one knows how and where to seek."

"I disagree," said Mr. Mirraton, sensing a delicate reference to some of his more popular compositions.

"When will your brother arrive?" Mr. Mourn asked quickly.

"Any minute, sir," said Tommy, liking Mr. Mourn for a deft switch in the conversation.

"What are you working on at present?" Mr. Mirraton asked.

"At random," smiled Tommy. "I don't think I'm ready for anything serious yet. I guess I feel it sometimes and get it all out of me. But most of it is garbage, and quite noticeable too."

THEY laughed, Mr. Mourn saying: "It's refreshing to hear a person who knows himself. That type of person will never allow his limitations to fester into phobias."

Mr. Mirraton glared at his colleague, but the opening of the door heralded the entrance of the breathless boy.

"Mr. Arney says he can't come now," said the boy, "he's busy."

Mr. Mirraton made a crude sound. "Then let's get on with it—if you please, Mr. Cordick."

Tommy suddenly had twin hearts that wanted out. He paled. "All right, gentlemen," he said. *Arney was busy. Arney was—*

He put all of his pent up emotions into his playing. Luckily it was Wagner.

His audience was enthralled.

"Inspired," murmured Mr. Mirraton who recognized a beautifully executed passage. "Dreadfully inspired."

Mr. Mourn allowed a great smile to show above his beard. His eyes moistened. He thought Mr. Wagner would have liked this setting for his music. So far away from everything he had known. . . Yet so close to the heart.

Mr. Skinzini felt faint—a sure sign of a new born star.

Then it was over. The last chord holding them with fascination as the whirring of a coiled snake might have.

They all spoke at once. They clapped him on the back, using superlatives that reddened the youth's face.

"You must come to New York," said Mr. Mirraton. "I shall be proud to have you as my protege."

"Our protege," said Mr. Mourn who knew he would never take from a piano what the boy had just erupted.

Mr. Skinzini fainted. His associates thought it a fitting tribute.

"Heard the whole town is tongueing 'bout yuh," Arney said at supper. "I'm damn' proud of you, Tom."

Tommy smiled weakly. "Yes. And you brought it about."

"Nothin'. . . Hey, yuh better eat, yuh gotta have strength."

"Not hungry."

"Go 'head try—or watch me eat. People get appetites watchin' me eat."

"They'll come back tomorrow," said Tommy. "They said they'd come at two-thirty."

"Let me know, will you?"

"Yes." His brother's business was his own. It must have been pressing business. But he would have liked to have seen his brother's face when they'd crowded around the piano. Yes, that would have been some small degree of payment.

The next day Mr. Mirraton and his associates arrived at twelve-thirty.

Tommy was distressed. "Gentlemen, you said you would be here at two-thirty?"

"Time," snorted Mr. Mirraton. "It kills you. Time is only useful for the making of memories. Bah."

Mr. Mourn smiled. "We couldn't wait for our appointed hour, Tom. Would you be good enough to play for a pack of frustrated artists at this inconvenient time?"

Tommy grinned. "I'm going to call my brother. It'll only take five minutes or so."

"What does your brother play?" asked Mr. Mirraton.

Tommy smiled ruefully. "He plays a game called life, gentlemen." And he left them.

"Remarkable lad," Mr. Mirraton said.

"Yes," said Mr. Skinzini.

"For heaven's sake keep your mouths shut, will you?" asked Mr. Mourn.

ARNEY wasn't at the saloon but the bartender said he could be found in the clearing at the edge of town.

As Tommy approached the green, twisted mass of foliage and tree stumps he heard the reports of a pistol being discharged. He hurried toward the harsh sounds. He slowed to a walk as he saw his brother standing with his back turned to him. Tommy didn't call out.

Arney reloaded his pistols and dropped them into their holsters. Then he drew the pistol on his right hip with blinding speed and fired at the slim trunk of a tree. He dropped the pistol in his holster and repeated the process. He performed the duty again and again and again.

The pistols were loaded again. He drew, fired, holstered, drew, fired holstered. When the right-side pistol was empty he quickly maneuvered the border shift bringing the loaded left-holster pistol to his right hand and fired methodically at the blackened bark of the slender tree.

Sweat glossed the back and armpits of Arney's shirt.

"Arney?"

He turned. "Hullo, kid."

"Arney—I—they . . ." The words wouldn't come. Blistering sweat made Arney's face a twitching mass of facial tissue. The lines dipped wearily about his nostrils.

"Mr. Mirraton is ready to listen," Tommy said, feeling foolish.

"Go 'head 'n play for 'im."

"Don't you want to be there?"

"If it was at two-thirty, yep. Now, no."

"Why?" snapped Tommy.

Arney drew, fired, drew, fired. Then turned to his brother. " 'Cause I gotta practise. From twelve to two I practise. Every day. Sunday, Monday, every day. I gotta practise to kill. You gotta practise to make people glad they're alive. If I stopped practising an' did what I liked somebody'd give me 'bout five in th' belly."

"Arney, I didn't—

"Yeh. Now git on home."

"I'll tell 'em to come back later, Arney."

"Naa. Play for 'em."

"I'll tell them I have to practise—they'll come back at two-thirty."

The smile slanted beatifically across Arney's face. "I'll be there, Tom, I'll be there."

Arney sat next to Mr. Mourn. The music started, Arney could tell by the loud fantastic sounds that beat the air about his ears, nose and open mouth.

There were brief pauses when they applauded but the sounds continued. He was a drawn, haggard man when he cheered with others at the completion of the recital.

Arney heard the fine congratulatory words and his brother's humble acknowledgments. He was so proud that he would have spat in the president's face if he had been present and would have made an unkind remark.

"Tommy must come to New York," said Mr. Mirraton.

"Yes," said Mr. Skinzini.

"He owes it to the world," said Mr. Mourn very deliberately, "it would be a sacrilege for him to remain here —as beautiful as it is."

And Arney felt the powdery dissolution of pride effect his stomach. He had never been so soulfully satisfied as he was this moment.

"I wisht ma coulda been here," Arney said harshly.

The peculiarly talented gentlemen remained silent.

"It is for you to decide," Mr. Mirraton said, "we will stay here another week to await your answer."

"I'M GOING," Tommy said. His thoughts weren't his own now. He couldn't forget his brother's strained face as he drew, fired, drew, fired. *Gotta practise Tommy. Monday, Sunday, everyday.*

Arney beamed. "I knew yuh'd see it, Tom."

"I'll play your favorite piece, Arney."

"Yeh, do thet."

Tommy went to the piano and struck a few cords tentatively. His brilliant mind held the idea and his supple fingers carried it out. He played a passage from Wagner, then turned to his brother. "Like it?"

"Thet Annie's Dance is th' best damn' song in th' whole world."

Tommy grinned. "Your taste in music can't be improved, Arney." And he turned back to the keyboard.

Arney winced. He couldn't bear another minute of those horrible sounds. A strange whirring hummed in his ears as it was.

Tommy turned to his brother. "You better go attend to your business, Arney, and I'll finish mine."

"Yeh, sure. Thanks, kid."

And Tommy smiled. *Bless your tone deaf ears.*

CHAPTER XIII

MARTY DAKE walked to the stove, turned, and moved back to his cot. His side didn't ache. He walked back to the unlit stove.

"That's it," said Janner. "You'll be getting out of here most any day now."

"Sure, how's business."

"Fair."

"I'll hold the biggest poker game those redskins ever saw," Marty said. "We'll be in the chips again. You watch."

Janner didn't say a word.

"Clara'd like to live in a big city, Billy. It isn't right to bring up a little girl in a place like this."

"What's wrong with this place?"

"Blast it, Billy, I want to feel safe. Would you marry a girl and live out here? Knowing that Indians or some woman-hungry trader might attack her."

"I don't know."

"Well I do. . . Billy, she's everything I ever wanted. She's warm, intelligent, beautiful. God, I'm going to give her everything."

"Sure. Well, I'll be getting along, Marty."

"Wait. Doc said I'd be able to leave in two-three days. Since Clara's father left, that leaves that big fort cabin vacant. They said me'n Clara can stay there when we're married. Then you can have our old cabin again. Then watch the trading firm of Janner and Dake go!"

Janner smiled. "Thought you were going to a big city?"

"After I make a big enough stake."

Janner left. He stopped before the saloon but there was too much talking going on inside and too little drinking. He headed for his cabin.

He was fifty feet from the cabin when he realized that it wasn't his cabin any more. It was Clara's now. He didn't know what to do.

He stood watching the sunlight spray the house, wondering what Clara was doing. He hadn't talked to her since that afternoon in the cabin. It was better this way. Much better for both of them.

He turned on his heel and walked toward the hulk of Caker's hut. He couldn't help but grin as he thought of the crazy old coot. But it was difficult to try and dislike the harmless codger. To his madness there was an honesty that was as overwhelming as his stench.

Caker opened the door. "Billy!"

"You saw me an hour ago," Janner said, grinning.

"Good to see you, come in. I jus' got done cooking some b'ar hunks."

Janner sawed off a hunk of bread and sopped up the tasty greases of the meat. He ate the steaming, soaked bread very quickly.

"You shore got an appetite, boy," said Caker.

"It's your cooking, Charley."

"It's thet gal ya two lad 'r' after—ho!"

He glared at the oldster but it had no effect.

"Nivver say when one gal was 'nough fer two young bucks, nivver."

"Shut up."

"'Tis my cabin—you shut up."

Janner shrugged hopelessly and left the old man sucking on a juicy piece of meat that was too much for his semi-toothless mouth.

He walked aimlessly down the crooked paths, kicking at pebbles, gazing up at the mighty Guadalope heights.

THERE was no hope. No use in wishing. Marty was his friend. He couldn't take anything away from him that brought him pleasure. He couldn't.

He tried to find fault with Clara. She was a little two plump. *But he liked that.* She was too sure of herself. *But that was natural for a woman of her experience.*

Little Sue. He never could find the right answers for that little kid. He couldn't. She was lively, mischievous, warm and generous with her wet little kisses.

For a long while Janner stood staring up at the clouds that didn't seem to evade the peaks. For the first time in his life he cursed God, His world and His peoples.

His anger dissipated as quickly as it had flared. He was sorry he had lost his head. But having little Sue calling him Dad or Papa—and Clara as his wife. . . .

He covered the ground to Caker's hut with long strides and a horrible slump to his shoulders. He didn't feel like much of anything. Desire for her had frozen Janner's emotions. He loved her as deeply as a man could love a woman.

He threw open the door. Caker waved his grease stained hands. His smeared beard waggled happily.

"Billy!"

"Throw that damned piece of meat away, you sucked all the muscle out of it."

Caker looked at the limp piece of meat in his hands. His face rounding into the guileless smile of a child. "I done thet—didn't I?"

Janner selected a tender, chewable chunk of meat with the point of the knife, brought it to the table and slapped it on Caker's plate. "Here, try this one. It isn't so hard."

The old man nodded, grabbing it with his hands. . . .

Clara walked quickly to the cot on which Dake was comfortably propped up.

"Oh, Marty." She kissed him slowly on the cheek, deftly evading his hands and lips.

"What is it quick-lips?"

She smiled wickedly, sat on the edge of the bed where her warmth and sway could be felt.

"Marty, please, let's get married—quickly."

"Sure. You'll have to wait 'til I can get up though."

"Yes, silly. As soon as the doctor says you can leave we'll send for the priest at the Medina River mission house to perform the ceremony."

"Darling. . . ."

Then she let him do as he wanted. Thank God there weren't any convalescing patients, she thought.

"I must be going, Marty," crisply.

He looked at her with surprise.

"I must be getting back to Sue, she may have awakened," gentling.

"Oh sure. One more kiss." He got it. Then: "Clara?"

"Yes," womanly.

"Do you love me?"

She laughed and cried a little. "Of course I do you big bear."

Marty made like a big bear. "I love you with all my heart and soul," said Marty, knowing it was a tritish phrase. But it happened to be the truth.

She didn't have to reply. She suddenly felt warm and good and honest. They clung together for hundreds of seconds.

"Marty!" reprovingly.

"Dammit, let's get married now."

"Silly. It'll only be a day or so. I'll send word to the priest."

"Will Sue call me Papa?"

"Of course."

Little squirts of tears glistened on Marty's crinkled eye corners. And Clara made a solemn promise never to see Billy alone again—never.

"Better go see for the baby," Marty said very gently.

Clara put her hands under his armpits and gently coaxed a sigh from his lips. "I'll make you happy," she said, "I'll make you love me."

Marty didn't argue the point. He couldn't wait—and to hear little Sue come racing toward him, yelling: "Papa, look what I found. *Papa.*"

CHAPTER XIV

THE three men who entered the saloon headed directly for Arney Cordick's table where he had been sitting before a spread of solitaire.

Cordick looked up. "Hello Lon, Dick—Ned."

They grumbled their greetings.

"We heard you were in New Braunfels," said Lon, a smile lengthing the dirty patchs of beard on his long face. "We got somethin' good now."

"What?"

"Guns—we can get two thousand Spencer carbines."

"Got a market for 'em, Lon?"

"Yeh. The high Injuns are joining together. We need 'bout twenty-five thousand to buy 'em."

"Twenty-five thousand?" softly.

"Yeh, those rifles were to go to the new outposts on the Republican. The agent says we can steal 'em easy enough if we pay twelve-fifty per rifle."

"Ain't got thet much," said Cordick.

"Don't be thet way," snapped Lon, "we hear yo're doin' great here—and you had plenty when you pulled out of the Guadalope."

"Yuh callin' me a liar?" Cordick said coldly.

"No—no, for God's sake, Arney, lis'en to reason. Those high Injuns got more'n eighty thousand *in gold*. All me'n the boys want is fifteen per cent, 'f course after you take what we woulda invested if we had the money."

"Ten per cent, I'm puttin' up the money."

"All right, all right," quickly.

Arney motioned to the bar. "Bring over a couple of good bottles, Hogan, an' hurry it up."

"Thought you didn't have the money," Dick said nastily.

"Ain't," said Cordick, "I'll borrow it somewhere. I only got fifteen thousand to invest."

"Where're you goin' to get it frum?" asked Ned.

"Those young fellers at the outpost."

"Janner and Dake?" Ned said, excitement tinging his tone.

"Yeh."

"No good," said Lon. "Thet Dake got hissel a wife now and with thet crooked deck of his he's makin' plenty."

"Let me worry 'bout thet."

"Does he know we ambushed them?" said Lon.

"How could they?" snapped Cordick. "They never saw or heard of yuh fellers. I kin always tell 'em I left in a hurry thinkin' they might've told on me havin' tizwin."

"Yeh," said Dick, "reckon thet's good enough. When're you goin' to go see 'em?"

"Soon's I fix up my affairs here. Where're the guns?"

"Don't worry 'bout them," said Lon. "Me'n the boys here can get 'em. You don't have to come. We just want you to see the high Injuns, they know you. You done plenty of business with them."

Cordick laughed. "How do I know yuh boys'll come back with the guns?"

"Hell, you can come with us if you don't trust us."

"I will," said Cordick. "An' I'll have those young fellers in on this too."

"Yo're right sure 'bout 'em, ain't yuh?" said Dick.

Cordick smiled. "Yuh said thet Marty feller got hitched, didn't yuh?"

"Yeh."

"Wal, I don't think I'll live to see th' day when a feller jus' hitched ain't itchin' to git his hands on some good money real quick like."

"He's right," said Lon.

"Damn' right I'm right," said Cordick. And they drank quickly and wordlessly.

TOMMY, I gotta go away for a little while, here's the money bags. There's 'bout thirty thousand in 'em. Leave for New York with those fellers as soon as yuh kin. I'll meet yuh in New York."

"You're leaving?" Tommy was amazed. "Why?"

"Some business. I got some money comin' to me from some old trading—err—partners."

"Business is business," Tommy said. "But aren't you going to need any money?"

"Arney grinned. "I got some nine hundred with me, don't worry."

"I'll take care of the money, Arn. Don't worry about that."

"Worry? Yuh spend as much of it as yuh want. Purty soon yuh'll have millions an' mebbe yuh'll give yore worthless brother a meal."

"Damn you," said the youth, "don't talk like that."

"Jokin'. Take good care of those hands, Tommy, real good care—an' the rest of yuh too."

"Good luck, Arney."

Arney smiled sadly. "Luck is for the lucky," he said gruffly. "An' anybody who's born ain't lucky. But th' same to yuh, kid, only yuh don't need it. God give yuh somethin' extra special. Somethin' yuh kin make money at and still enjoy it. Good-by."

"Good-by."

That night Arney reined close to the three waiting horsemen. "Dick an' Ned go to the post in the Guadalope. Me'n Lon'll go get the rifles."

"What the hell is this all 'bout?" snarled Lon.

"I'm the boss," plunged Arney. "Now git yuh two. Yuh said thet this agent had the rifles in two wagons. Thet if we had the twenty-five thousand we could hitch up the horses an' ride away with 'em, right?"

"Right," said Lon. "But what if somebody jumps us. We won't have a chance."

"It's a short trip from the agent's place to the Guadalope," said Cordick.

"Twenty-four hours," said Lon.

"Yuh do it my way or none, said Arney.

"Thought you didn't have twenty-five thousand," said Lon.

"I borrowed some from friends in town. Now git yuh two fellers. Me'n Lon've got a lot of riding to do."

"Why do you want us to go?" said Dick.

"'Cause yuh fellers might think brave like with two more to side yuh. Me'n Lon are goin' to be safe enough. There's two wagons. We're two. Git it?"

"Yeh," said Dick, "but what if yuh get jumped on the way?"

Arney swore savagely. "We won't. There's only a few bad spots 'long the trail an' yuh *two* fellers kin spread the word with the high Injuns thet two wagons goin' like hell ain't to be stopped."

"Yo're crazy," sneered Ned, "thet'll make 'em lay fer yuh?"

Arney chuckled. "Yuh tell em the guns are broken up an' if they 'tack us they get bits of rifles—maybe they'll even give us a little protection."

"By God," said Lon, "you're a smart gent Arney."

"An' Frozen Face is a mighty honorable chief," said Arney, "it might work. Come on, let's git goin'."

They watched Ned and Dick gallop off into the darkness. Lon said:

"Frozen Face's a good chief, I'd bet my last dollar he'll give us a right elegant escort."

Arney Cordick said, "C'mon, let's get goin'." This was his chance for the real big killing he had always dreamed of. He wouldn't let it slip from his fingers—and if it did—those fingers would be mighty stiff and unable to hold anything nohow.

Cordick liked the stakes—better still he knew how to play the game. In fact he was as downright happy as he could ever get.

"Nice night, ain't it, Lon?" Arney said over the rushing hoof-plates of their mounts.

Lon swore viciously. "Sometimes I think you're crazy."

"Our family's like thet," laughed Arney Cordick. "My brother even plays th' pee-anno. Damned good too."

"We're to wait 'til a rainy night," said Lon, "that way we gotta better chance of gettin' away and not makin' the agent look like a crook."

Cordick swore with fine humor. This was the rainy season. . . .

CHAPTER XV

IT WAS an outpost situated on a level, cleared prairie. They stood in their stirrups and watched the blur of activity going on about the walls of the outpost.

"They're leaving this place soon," said Lon. "Agent said he don't know 'xactly when 'cause the official order hasn't come yet. But it'll be sometime this week for sure."

"Where's the agent's cabin?"

"You can't see it from here, Arn. It's inside the fort."

Cordick showed Lon his white, angry face. "So I did make a mistake, didn't *I*, Lon?"

Lon smiled cagily. "You ain't th' only smart one. Agent told me that most of the sojers go out in force to prove to th' Injuns thet they're still boss—understand?"

"Naa."

"Wal, I'm goin' in to see th' agent, he'll know when to give us the high-sign. He said we could take the wagons out through the sally port."

Arney's face brightened. "Thet ain't bad. The sojers on patrol an' me'n you sashaying out through their parade hole—all right, go see the agent."

Lon whistled gayly as he reined up close to Cordick. "Today the post commander and his whole two companies is going to pay a visit to the big Comanche chief hereabouts, bringin' 'im gifts. Agent said things are real peaceful like here. Ain't no need for a' outpost no more. The rifles was for this outfit to bring to the Republican where all hell is bustin' loose."

"When do we git th' wagons, Lon?"

"Tonight—about nine or ten o'clock—he said."

"Let's eat."

"How'n hell can you eat?"

"I got a' appetite thet's how. Watch me, yuh'll git hungry in a little while too."

Lon drank some coffee, but he couldn't keep his eyes away from the fort. He said: "Arney, when I told you those high Injuns had mebbe eighty thousand I was jus' guessin'."

"Yeh?"

"I think there's more." Lon waited, then continued: "Those high Injuns made plenty before the Guadalope fort was put up. They had it purty easy jumpin' any wagon train or party that they wanted. I guessed they had about eight thousand.. Hell, Frozen Face has little barrels of gold pipeces!"

"Then yore ten per cent'll be good."

"Reckon so."

"Let's look over the territory, Lon."

"I know this section. You jus' follow my wagon."

"We'll get through all right, Lon."

"Yeh."

THEY saw the troopers pull out for their peace mission with the Comanche chieftain. They waited for the darkness to crease everything.

"Let's go," said Arney, and they gave their mounts the knivey spurs and pushing knees.

Lon knocked on the door as Arney carried the heavy saddle bags.

The door swung open. The agent was a very handsome young man of no more than twenty-four-or-five years of age.

"Come in—quickly."

"He got the money," said Lon, watching Cordick.

Arney opened one of the bags, taking handfuls of gold coins from its capacious depth. "It'll take a little while for yuh to count it," said Arney, "why not let my side-kick get the wagons ready?"

"All right," said the agent, "you know where the horses are."

Lon left.

"Got a drink?" said Cordick.

"Certainly."

Arney very slowly drank the strengthy forty rod. He downed the second drink quickly. He started counting coins again. Then his meager store of gold pieces was depleted.

"That's not even a thousand," snapped the agent.

"I know I just brought in the heavy bags to fool yuh if maybe yuh had funny ideas."

The agent laughed nervously. "I'm an honest man. Go get the rest."

Arney turned. He walked to the door; he made a motion to unlatch the door then spun, drew, shot.

The handsme young man was dead before he folded to the floor. Arney very swiftly put the gold coins back into his saddle bag and went out.

"Be through in a minute," said Lon. "Did you hear a shot, Arn?"

"Na."

"All right, let's go."

CHAPTER XVI

GOOD day!" said Dake. "We mad about seven hundred."

Janner nodded. "Yes, it was." His voice sounded natural . . . Yet he couldn't qute believe that Clara and Sue belonged to Marty exclusively now. He was hurt deeply and the pain showed if one knew what to look for.

"C'mon over to the cabin tonight," invited Dake. "Clara's a wonderful cook. We got some ducks—mmm, an' can Clara make a duck a sweet bird."

Janner grinned. "Charley had some deer meat. That crazy old bug eats all the time. Everything tastes good too."

"How much have we got now, Billy?"

"With today's take, about nine thousand."

"I'd better get my deck rigged pretty quick."

"No . . . We said we'd get it honest. We're crooked enough."

"Dammit, Billy, since when have you took to preaching?"

"Since you got yourself a wife and kid."

Dake sighed. "I'm too blasted happy to argue over anything, you know"—Dake's mouth moved but no sound emitted—"look who's riding in!"

Janner turned. He saw Cordick and a tall, bearded man riding toward them.

Dake's eyes slanted, but he didn't say a word.

Janner felt the hate burn his pounding belly. He remembered the long night with Marty on the river bed. He remembered the long frantic run through the rain. He remembered his promise.

Cordick saw them and reined up sharply. He dismounted, led his horse to them.

"Hullo boys," Cordick said genially.

Janner kept the mounted man in sight out of the corner of his eye. "Hello, Arney."

Cordick moved closer to Janner who backed a step or two. "Lis'en, boys, I hadda get utta here. I heard yuh an' Marty had trouble and thought maybe somebudy was wise to me. But yuh boys didn't talk. Thet's why I come back!"

"To make sure we weren't dead?" Janner said softly.

"I told yuh I sure appreciated what yuh boys done for me. I come back 'cause I got somethin' thet'll make us each twenty-five thousand or more."

Dake pushed Janner aside. "Let's go inside."

"Get out of here," Janner said quietly.

"Now, boy! Think—think o' all them thousands!"

"Get out."

"Let's hear him out," said Marty. "I owe him more than you do."

"Owe me?" croaked Cordick innocently. "Yuh boys don't owe me nothin'."

"Inside," said Janner, motioning to the rider to vamose.

"I'll meet yuh at my old cabin," Cordick said to Lon. "Go 'head, I'm safe with these fine boys."

"Damn your guts," spat out Marty, "it better be good."

"Wal, thet's it, boys. Yuh fellers help me git those rifles to the the high Injuns an' yuh'll get twenty per cent each. Now how's thet?"

"Why give us such a large percentage?" Marty asked. "You said you'd have to split with three others as it is?"

"I owe yuh boys somethin'." Cordick stared manfully at them. "Yuh boys know I don't have to ambush anybudy to git 'em outta th' way. I'm the best gun slick hereabouts."

Janner eyed the man but he didn't say a word. It was true.

"How're we going to get the rifles up to them?" asked Marty.

"We don't they meet us by Stone Hill."

"I don't get it," said Janner. "You want us just to help escort the wagons?"

"Thet's 'bout th' size of it."

"You're lying," snapped Janner.

"All right," sighed Cordick. "An' I ain't gettin' riled at yuh 'cause it ain't the truth. Thets' th' kind of feller I am."

"C'mon," barked Marty. "Get to the point."

"Wal, those three fellers who came to me with the proposition ain't to be trusted. They'd put a bullet in my back the first chance they got."

"Why did they come to you?" Marty asked.

"I put up the money for the guns."

"It makes sense," said Janner, "to your way of thinking, Cordick."

Cordick smiled wearily. "Wal, yuh boys either are with me or yuh ain't, make up your mind." And as Marty turned toward the window Arney motioned Janner that he had to talk to him.

"Give us an hour," said Janner, "I'll walk to the fort with you."

Marty remained silent.

"It's this way," said Arney to Janner, "those three fellers 'r' th' same snakes thet ambushed yuh an' Marty."

"How do you know?"

"They told me. We gotta do it to 'em 'fre they do it to us. Even th' bible says that."

Janner smiled. "Yeh, maybe a thousand religions got their ideas from the bibles." And he remembered the yellow little temple he and Marty were going to erect.

"Then yuh boys are with me?"

"Yes."

"We move tonight. The boys are guardin' th' wagons. Stone Hill's 'bout two hours ride from here. Frozen Face has a camp near the foot of the hill. We'll do our business with 'im there."

"What time?"

"We pull out when it darks."

"Where'll we meet you?"

"Yuh boys kin head through the Guadalope trail, we'll let yuh know—we'll be 'head of yuh on th' trail."

"All right."

"Yuh'll never regret this, boy. I got a brother 'bout yore age; I think of yuh boys like I would of my own children."

Janner grinned. "Yu don't know where your children are at."

"But I think of 'im," said Arney Cordick. "I sometimes even burn candles to Saint Michael to look after 'em."

"Why Saint Michael?"

"Wal, if He coulda bested th' devil He kin at least look after my brats."

Janner left Cordick and headed back for the cabin.

"We need the money," he said to Dake. "There's no joke to that. We could pull out of here with twenty-twenty-five thousand apiece."

Dake nodded.

"I don't like it," admitted Janner, "but things aren't like they were here. Why don't you go tell Clara you won't be home tonight and I'll get the horses."

"Yeah—thanks, Billy. And you better eat something. Clara'll fix me up with a bite."

"Caker'll have something. He always has."

JANNER had warned Marty to be on the alert but didn't tell him what Cordick had told him about the ambushers. That would have put Marty in a maniacal mood and they desperately needed steady nerves. He decided to handle that piece of business in his own manner.

"We should be coming across their trail any minute now," said Marty.

Janner didn't reply. He wasn't fearing another ambush. Cordick wouldn't have rode like he had if that was his intention.

They rode on for about another mile before approaching sound of a lone horseman. They reined up, and in a minute Dick slanted from a thicket and skidded to a halt before them.

"Cordick told me to bring yuh to him," said Dick.

"Lead on," said Marty.

They followed him, and soon they spotted the wagons and Cordick.

"There's the wagons," Cordick said, "Frozen Face's camp is seven-eight miles from here. Don't worry, there's plenty of Injuns watching us right now from upstairs. Don't do nothin' funny. Frozen Face's an honorable Injun.

"He wants rifles an' no kickback. He kin trust us and we kin trust 'im. Thet's the way he does business. Only don't try an' cross 'im."

IT WAS an encampment of some-one hundred braves; it was nothing more than a temporary camp and any old campaigner could have come to that conclusion due to the fact that there weren't any young squaws about.

The two wagons screeched to a halt.

"Thet's Frozen Face's remaining son," Arney warned, and they watched the tall, slender brave come to greet them.

The brief ritual completed, they followed him to the largest tepee and entered the large cone constructed of buffalo hides. There were paintings on the taut hides representing the greatness of the chief's prowess as a warrior and hunter. A fire was burning in the center of the tepee and the smoke smudged upward and out through the hole in the top.

Janner and Marty choked but managed to keep their eyes from tearing by pressing their bandanas over their eyelids. Their excitement soon allowed them to forget their bodies.

Frozen Face was an elderly Comanche with the wrinkled stomach of age detracting little from his personal distinctness. He carried himself with the ease that is inherent in leaders.

"Welcome, my friends," he greeted in broken English. "Many sleeps since I have seen you Arney Cordick."

Many troubled sleeps," replied Cordick in his most affable manner.

The chief nodded. "They starve us, they want to put us in little certain places—they cheat us—me and my tribe rather die by white man's powder and saber. Much better than waiting for them to come to us. We go to kill them and maybe have chance of winning."

"We have two thousand rifles for your great warriors," said Cordick.

"We make war to the knife on them all," said Frozen Face very quietly, as if he wanted a few of his white friends to know that he didn't hate them all.

"You want the rifles?" Marty said loudly.

The chieftain nodded. "Me got gold."

"How much?" said Cordick. "We give yuh all th' guns we got yuh give us all the gold yuh got."

Two braves were dispatched to get the gold pieces and the chief continued his discourse upon the justifiable war he was making on his enemy.

There were six small kegs of gold pieces. Cordick and Dake dipped their hands through the coins. There were no false bottoms. The tiny kegs were filled to capacity with gold pieces of twenty dollar values and ten dollar denominations.

"Thank yuh an' good luck," Cordick said to the chieftain. "We gotta be gettin' back."

"No."

"But—"

"You stay and eat, drink and smoke pipe with me. You my friends."

The six renegados eyed each other fearfully.

"Thank yuh," Cordick said quickly, "we'd be mighty proud to sit with yuh but we got important business."

"No. You stay, you my friends." The Comanche smiled and if any of that small group of traitors had any doubts to the chieftain not being an intelligent being they were dispelled immediately. His intelligence was that of the mighty puma lord, the untrained poet or a man who played with God every minute of his savage existence.

The lined face gentled, the glittering eyes made a little bow. The Indian said slowly and with great care: "The sleeping dog can be awakened by soft promise as by another animal. You safe here."

"We will stay," said Cordick who knew Indian customs. Strangely enough he thought of the fat little puppy he'd had when he had been a boy.

And for a sudden minute he realized that he was happy. That you couldn't find happiness—that you had to bring it with you. And in this case he had brought tools of death which would bring misery to countless children, men, women and troopers.

WHAT the hell?" Dake growled to Cordick. "What is this all about?"

"Injun custom. When yuh do any of 'em what they consider a *big* favor yuh gotta stay with 'em for a little while."

"Let's make a run for it," said Dake.

"We're safe long's the chief wants us," said Cordick. "If yuh wanta run go 'head an' run. But yuh ain't takin' any of th' gold with yuh."

"We'll stay," said Janner.

"Boys," said Cordick, "I et with Injuns afore. Make like yuh're enjoyin' it. Don't worry they won't pay, too much attention to yuh."

Frozen Face spoke very rapidly in his native tongue to the attending warriors. They hastened out.

Cordick's face crinkled distastefully. The six white men were huddled together on the ground of the tepee.

"What'd the chief Injun say to those braves?" Lon asked slowly.

Cordick swallowed. "Our feast is goin' to start off with marrow guts."

Marty ran his hand over his stomach.

"Raw marrow guts," continued Cordick. "Injuns don't think they need be cooked."

The very odor of the intestine sickened them but soon their lips were red and they're fingers wet from holding the strands. Dick and Dake vomited.

Frozen Face looked depressed with the condition of Dick and Dake. "Please forgive," he said. "I have it cooked for you."

Janner felt his body take on a burning heat. He wasn't angry, yet he wasn't sick. He liked Frozen Face. Janner didn't give a damn' about himself. He was honest enough to admit to himself that he was gently pleased with the condition of Marty. Hell, he had everything waiting for him back at the fort. He had nothing.

Five or six feet of the marrow guts were twined around a stick and thrust into the blaze of the fire. Salt was thrown over the mass and soon the not unpleasant odor of melting fat clipped their nostrils.

The stick was politely passed around. The white men made the motions of eating while the Indians gulped the dripping marrow guts in its blistering, burning condition.

The Indians, during the feast, kept wiping their greasy fingers through their hair.

Cordick grinned. "They think it's good for their hair."

"When will this be over?" Marty groaned.

Cordick said quietly, "They kin each eat fifteen-twenty pounds of meat. I don't think they got much more left."

Then it was over.

"Thank God it's over," Dake breather. "Tell him if we can go now."

Cordick politely asked the chieftain if they could leave.

"Many chiefs of Kiowa come," promptly replied Frozen Face. "I want them to join forces with my tribes. I want them to see my white friends."

"Gawd," croaked Cordick to his mates, "thet's why he kept us for dinner. He wants to show us off to the Kiowas he wants on his side . . ."

The drums began their pounding beats.

"Let's make a run for it," Janner said to Cordick.

"Ain't got a chance."

"But most of the Kiowas arrived," argued Janner. "What in hell does he want with us now?"

"He's waitin' for Painted Cloud to arrive."

"Why doesn't he send for him."

"Because Painted Cloud is a smart cuss. Doesn't want to mix with the cavalry. But he's got 'bout five hundred braves. Tough customer, only he thinks he likes the white men now."

Janner stiffened. Then—then—then the drums *began*. It wasn't the routine sounding of messages. It was the terrible, sultry, stirring of taut drumheads meeting the breeze and coaxing the message along. It was the devilish throb of the *gambling* message.

Dake nudged Janner. He had grown accustomed to the smoky, reeking interior of the tepee. He could see as clearly as any of them now.

"The gambling drums," said Dake, remembering the last time he had heard their murmuring challenge.

Cordick laughed. "Thet'll bring Painted Cloud. He almost gambled 'way his favorite squaw two-three years ago."

"Mean he wants to let 'im see *us* an' we kin go?" Dick said thickly.

"Yeh."

PAINTED CLOUD arrived and was given a two hour address by Frozen Face.

"They talk for hours," Cordick whispered, "thet shows they know what they're talkin' 'bout."

The rifles were shown to the Kiowa chieftain and he expressed great delight. He mentioned with a detached tone if he had misunderstood the messages of the tom-toms.

"Me and all of my *friends* shall start the game now," said Frozen Face.

Painted Cloud smiled. "My people are hungry too. We shall join your band."

The pipe was smoked and the chieftain of the Comanches brought out a pair of dice.

"Ug," murmured Painted Cloud, "poker—better."

Frozen Face nodded and a fresh packet of cards was opened.

Cordick walked to the chieftain. "Kin we go now? We brought you many guns!"

"You can stay, my friends, nothing shall happen to you. It is for your safety, *now*, that I wish you to stay."

Cordick laughed. "We kin take care of ourselves."

"No my son, stay. Accept a wise old man's word. I shall give you a guard to take you back."

Cordick returned to the huddled group on the ground—away from the flap of the tepee. "He says for us to stay. Don't git worried. He's all right. He's got nothin' 'gainst me or the boys here."

The gaming went swiftly. All of the warriors that could crowd into the tepee were three deep about the players. The six white men, as a safety measure, crouched about Frozen Face.

Painted Cloud was a daring player. He won a huge pot on two sixes, and filled one inside straight, all the while staying in on every hand.

Frozen Face played a waiting game. He threw in his hand when he held a poor one and occasionally threw a bluff. The others never knew when he was shamming or had added to a fine hand.

It was straight, three card draw poker with nothing wild. A certain amount of cheating took place, but more often than not the culprit was spotted and he had to forgeit his hand and lose whatever he had invested in his hand.

Dake took out his watch. It was three A.M. The tide of the game had to turn soon. One of them had to pick up a good hand against someone's bluff.

Two of the players had been wiped out. Three remained: Frozen Face, Painted Cloud and an old Kiowa who was a minor chieftain. Frozen Face held the edge with winnings.

The cards were handed out.

The ancient Kiowa placed half of his coins into the pot which was fifty dollars a hand.

The others counted their coins carefully and matched the sum.

"Give me two cards," said the Kiowa.

Janner could see Frozen Face's hand. He drew to two tens. Painted Cloud accepted three cards also.

The old Kiowa thrust his remaining coins into the center. Again they counted the coins and examined their cards.

Frozen Face now held four tens.

Painted Cloud imperiously tossed the required amount of coins into the pot—adding a like sum. "And raise one hundred thirty dollars," said Painted Cloud.

Frozen did likewise—adding a hundred more than Painted Cloud.

The old Kiowa looked at them. He was shy some two hundred and thirty dollars.

"Finger—finger," said the old Kiowa calmly.

Painted Cloud shrugged.

"As you want," said Frozen Face, showing his four tens with jack high.

Painted Cloud disgustedly threw in his hand.

THE old Kiowa drew his hunting knife and placed his out-stretched hand, palm downward, near the coins. He quickly snapped the knife's keen blade over the knuckle joint. Blood ran over the coins, cards and ground. He sawed at the bone. Sweat clouded his face. He turned to his chieftain, Painted Cloud, said something swiftly.

Painted Cloud made a motion with his hand and a glittering little hatchet was placed before the old Kiowa.

He immediately hacked off the bleeding finger and with precisely the correct amount of power chopped off the other finger.

Frozen Face gathered in his winnings, fondling the hard little sausage-like attachments to hands.

The old Kiowa smiled and fell backward. Three braves dragged him out.

"Let's play good now," said Frozen Face, putting handfuls of coins in the center.

Painted Cloud nodded; he could only match three-quarters of the Comanche chieftain's pot. He complied, said:

"One hand—same poker—no raise."

Frozen Face nodded, put the cards down to be cut then slowly handed five cards to his ally.

Frozen Face held two queens, an ace, trey and four. He retained the two queens and the ace.

Painted Cloud asked for three cards.

"Two tens, two sevens," said Painted Cloud."

"Two aces, two queens, said Frozen Face.

Painted Cloud shrugged, got to his feet. "My braves come to your high lodge in maybe one-two sleeps."

They bid each other a fortunate day and Frozen Face escorted him to the opening of the tepee.

Lon: Did it happen? Did I see *that?*

Dick: Dammit.

Ned: Rather o' et more stinkin' guts 'n of seed *that.*

Arney: Gutty old dog to do *that.*

Billy: Nobody'll ever believe me when I say *this.*

Marty: You frozen-faced dog. I'll make you pay for making me sick twice in one day—for *that.*

CHAPTER XVII

CORDICK asked the chief if they could leave.

"Yes."

Dake grinned. "Maybe you'd like to have a little game with me, huh?"

Frozen Face's eyes were steady black orbs of beaming irrationalness. He nodded. "Yes."

Cordick grabbed Dake's arm; Janner jumped to his feet. The others stared with mouths that moved the filthy oaths from their bellies to the stirring atmosphere about them.

"You're crazy," whispered Janner. "Marty—are you sick?"

"Yea—sure. Sick of this red rat's nest."

"Then let's get outa here," growled Cordick. "He said we could go."

"Go ahead, leave. I'm playing with my share."

Frozen Face smiled; it was a stronge loosening of his facial muscles which was childish in its natural reflex.

"He want to play," said the chief, "let him play."

Cordick roughly pushed Janner aside. "It's no use—if we lose face 'fore Frozen Face he'll think we're all yellow bellies, an' thet's th' end if he thinks that."

"One of the kegs is mine," said Dake to Cordick, "is that right?"

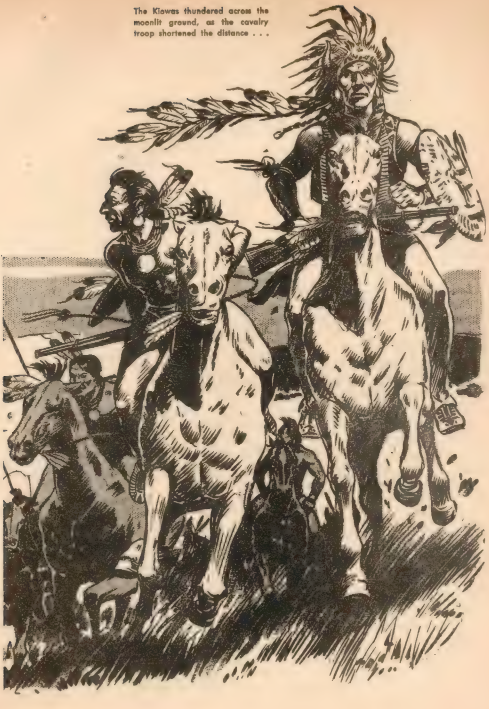
Cordick licked the sweat from the corners of his mouth. He nodded. "Go 'head yuh —— dung-lunged coyote."

Marty grinned dully, and sat on the ground with his legs crossed under him; he soon altered his position to a hunkering crouch and finally piled some buffalo robes under his back-side and sighed contentedly.

The chief nodded, and Marty picked up the cards. He thrilled them together with a quick shuffle then dropped the cards as if they had suddenly been heated by the devil.

"The blood," said Marty, pointing to the stains on the cards. "Bad medicine."

The chief deliberated over the issue.



The Kiowas thundered across the moonlit ground, as the cavalry troop shortened the distance . . .

The pale light of a dawning day stirred the gloom of the tepee with ogreish shades which obscured the faces of the gamblers for a moment.

Marty took out his deck of cards. "Let's go outside," he said. "We can see better." And he could see the markings in the bright light of a new day.

"All right," said Frozen Face, rising, and they went to a level clearing where blankets were spread for the players to sit on and a green blanket for the cards and coins.

Marty shuffled the cards and placed them before the Comanche chief for him to cut. Frozen Face reached over and slapped the cards away from him. They scattered at the feet of the horde circling them.

Lon: Why didn't I stay in Montana?

Dick: Gamblin' is like livin'. You either play it straight or crooked or both.

Ned: I'd give a thousand fer a cup of good home coffee.

Arney: Maybe we'll never pull outta here—with pelts or gold.

Billy: Wonder what Frozen Face wants?

Marty kept a magnificent calm. "Something wrong?" he asked coolly.

"No like play with old cards." He waved and three fresh packets of playing cards were placed before the chief.

The cards felt fine and cool against Marty's finger tips. There was a certain elation to feeling unsullied cards between one's fingers that pulled most of the dread from the vital regions.

He dipped his hand into the keg. "Fifty dollar pots?"

"Yes."

Lon: He's got 'bout fifteen thousand in that keg.

Dick: Why didn't we leave him to play if he wanted?

Ned: Red is red and White is white.

Arney: Wonder what Tommy's doin' right now?

Billy: Is Clara still sleepin'?

FROZEN FACE won the first hand which totaled one hundred dollars.

"Sky the limit?" asked Marty.

"Yes."

Marty won the second hand.

The cards were slowly passed out by the chief. Marty decided to test the nerveless Indian. He had a deuce, four, queen, seven and eight in his hand.

"How many?" said the Indian when Marty made no motion.

"I'll play these," he said, putting three hundred dollars in the pot.

The Redman nodded, matching the sum and discarding three cards. He slowly ropped the required amount of cards before his two cards and then picked them up slowly. His face was that of a benign priest.

"Five hundred more," said Marty.

The chief stood in, raising it five more.

Marty smiled, "Five, and a thousand more."

The frozen face pleasured with the heightening of suspense. "All right here is my money. I call."

Marty shrugged showed him his worthless hand. There were two nines, a jack, deuce and ten.

Lon: What the hell?

Dick: Marty's all right.

Ned: He's in the red now.

Arney: The kid's got it.

Billy: Now it's for blood—it's a battle of guts—they know each other.

Frozen Face won the next hand and the next.

Marty won a two thousand dollar pot and raised the pot to a hundred dollars a hand.

Again the white man won.

Now. Marty shuffled the cards with

careless ease. *Now*. He had about twelve thousand left. He could afford to further feel out his adversary.

The chief gazed at his hand then at Marty. He shrugged and dropped three. Marty handed him three cards and quickly gave himself two. Maybe this hand would be good enough to try it. *No*.

"Fifty," said Frozen Face

Marty matched the sum and saw the chief's pair of fours. He won with three fives.

Now. Marty looked at the three nines in his hand. He gave the chief three cards and took two. He picked up two queens. Full house.

Here goes. Marty turned to Janner, showing his hand to him with a flourish. It was the first time he had done such a thing. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the Indian eye the discards and deck with brightened eyes.

Marty half turned his back on the chieftain—then turned quickly. Frozen Face was quietly petting his five cards with square, strong fingers.

The chief raised a hundred. Marty doubled it but the Indian threw in his hand. It was over. Now he knew that he *was* an honorable chief. He wouldn't cheat and forfeit the hand—or risk winning it.

It was straight poker with no frills and all chills. It was poker to the finish with the better man maybe losing.

Lon: He tried to pull somethin'!

Dick: Maybe he's cracking?

Ned: Na. Thet woulda been too damned ob—ob—easy to see.

Arney: Honesty pays. . . .

Billy: Don't think you'll walk away from this one, old friend.

IT WAS bright, light. It was day. None of the refreshing mountain breezes penetrated the solid mass of spectators arund the two. Sweat made weak tracings down their cheeks, to their chins, gleamed for a moment then fell to the ground.

Got to win one good pot. Marty picked up his hand. Same damn luck. He discarded three, retaining an ace and ten; good old aces, come to me. One-two-three-. Four aces . . . Wouldn't that be something?

"Check," said Marty.

The Indian shrugged, making a dull sound with hand against the warming earth.

"Three aces," said Marty, showing them.

He raked in the five hundred dollar pot. He had about eight thousand left. No—eleven! No, seven. He didn't know. The barrell was still heavy—but it was less than three-quarters *empty*. But he had heaps of coins before him. Count. No. Count and see, Marty. No.

Lon: Got mebbe three-four thousand left.

Dick: This'll teach 'im.

Ned: Feel sorry fer th' kid.

Arney: Thet's why I don't like gamblin'.

Billy: Will Marty try to borrow some money? Will I refuse him? Clara?

Frozen Face won two out of three hands.

Marty counted his remaining fortune. He had fourteen hundred and twenty dollars left.

"One hand—same poker—no raise." The Indian said, "Yes."

Marty received the usual hand. He retained two tens. He received three lower cards. He lost.

They remained seated, looking at each other with the dull eyes of the victor and the crushed.

Marty slowly pulled off his watch chain, placed the watch and chain in the center. Then he dropped two rings, his fine felt hat and the silver cigar case with two cigars in it.

The chief put five handfuls of coins in the center. Marty didn't make a motion to pick up the cards.

One more handful. Marty remained stiff and silent.

Five more handfuls. Marty shuffled and handed out the cards.

. . . .

"You win, chief."

"Yes."

Lon: No. Sure.

Dick: Hell no.

Ned: Na. Sure.

Arney: Mebbe. Yet. . . .

Billy: Yes. He knew Marty.

Then Marty saw the rich, deep chest of the Redman heave with ecstatic pleasure.

Frozen Face smiled. There was no doubt now. He hated all things white.

In the exact center of Marty's forehead a cool pressing sensation thrilled his heated nerve centers.

"How much is a white arm worth, chief?"

"No finger?"

"Arm," tightly.

The chieftain stretched out his arm and pulled the empty money cask of Marty's to his knees. He picked up handfuls of gold coins and dropped them into the keg. They made coarse, banging sounds as they clanked to the bottom.

The keg was there for all to see. It was half-filled with the cold, round pieces.

"All right," said Marty and the cards were dealt.

Marty looked at the Indian.

Frozen Face smiled. "Raise half a keg of gold."

Marty wanted to live. He wanted to run. He wanted to live. He wanted to run. Why had he forgotten to say *no raise*. Maybe he didn't have to accept the Indian offer—or was it a challenge? He didn't give a damn. Everything was a roaring blackness. . . .

He couldn't throw in his cards. He knew that much. If he did he would lose his original investment . . . Something his mother and father had sobbed with pleasure over. Something they had not cared about . . . Something Frozen Face cared only to own.

"ALL right," said Marty, "my other arm. Give me three cards" He looked at his hand. He had three queens. He didn't dare raise.

"Call," said Marty.

The Indian dropped the token coin. "I *see* you."

The heart of Martin L. Dake filled with a strange fluid, it came from unknown arteries. It was a liquid called by many names by many peoples. Marty knew it to be a cold, relentless, crazy fear. What if—

"Three queens, ten high."

"Three jack, two deuces," said the Indian.

Lon: Nothing. He didn't know.

Dick: I can get at least three of 'em 'fore—

Ned: Lucky we're all together, we got a chance—mebbe.

Arney: Damn yore guts.

Billy: We're going to build that church, Billy . . . And he was going to be its first martyr.

Marty said, "Bet my two legs 'gainst my two arms. One hand—same poker—no raise."

"Pay me what I won."

"I couldn't play with no arms. I'm weak. I'm no Redman. I'll pay. I give you my word."

Frozen Face allowed his teeth to show. There was a deep insatiable rhythm to his grinding teeth. "All right."

Marty dealt. His hands didn't shake.

He couldn't bring about that emotion. Then—then—then it broke. His belly and chest heaved. His hands fluttered like the wings of blind crows. His heart was making deafening sounds. And he thought of Clara.

Frozen Face chuckled. "Two sevens —two kings."

Marty threw in his cards.

. . . .

"I have only one thing left," said Marty. "My guns. They're bone handled and perfect. He held out his coat as a woman might her skirts.

"Two guns against hand," said Frozen Face, "hand I already own."

You're through. Marty put the gunbelt in the center.

"All right."

Frozen Face dealt. Marty picked up a deuce, ace, four, queen and a jack. Four of the cards were of different markings. He retained the ace and queen. He received a jack, duece and another jack.

"Two jacks, ace high."

"Three fours."

"You win."

"Yes."

Lon: Hatchet—knives?

Dick: Legs first—o'course.

Ned: Gawd help us.

Arney: My kid brother's hands would've been worth more'n a half-cask of gold.

Billy: Just this once—God—I'll never cheat in bartering . . . Just this once.

•

MARTY was stiff and silent. Frozen Face came to the conclusion that the legs had to go first—of course.

"Well, good-by, chief," Marty said.

A strange, almost gentle, emotion snaked across the Comanche warrior's icy features. "Good-by, good brave."

Marty drew the two guns from the gun-belts before him and pulled the triggers as quickly as he could. The right hand gun clicked emptily.

The Indian's old chest was punctured as a beer keg by a drunken man. The red stuff slurred down over his white man's trousers. He had fallen backwards. His mouth was open—but he would never retch out the words.

The shrieks of wild animals demanding a wild justice threw the six whites into a snarling group.

Marty raised his right hand; and walked toward Frozen Face's son. He looked directly into the no-knowledge eyes.

"You chieftain now?"

"Me White Stone," said the youth. "Me chief now." His eyes were like those of a woman with child pains.

"Who killed your father?" yelled Marty, startling the Indians.

"You."

"No."

"Who?"

"Your father killed himself."

"Lie."

"Who's hands pulled the trigger of the guns that killed him?"

"Your hands."

"Who's hands were they?"

"My father's. He won them."

"He killed himself."

White Stone turned to his people, speaking with guttural preciseness.

They shieked with laughter, jumping and waving their arms.

"Go now," said White Stone. "Go—all of you."

Lon: He means it.

Dick: I'm gone.

Ned: Thank Gawd.

Arney: Mebbe I'm the only cursed one.

Billy: Marty—why did you do it?

Marty: Clara's warmth. The little warm hands of Sue. Clara's warm lips . . . I'm so cold.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT WAS ten minutes past twelve when Marty returned to his home.

"Marty!"

"Papa—papa!"

"Uh, hello . . ."

"You look exhausted, dearest. Was it a very hard trading bout with the Indians, Marty?"

"Yeh—yes."

"Here, sit down. I'll make some fresh coffee."

"I just want to sleep."

"You look so—" she didn't finish the sentence. "Sue, leave off with your jumping. Marty, why don't you stretch out for awhile. I'll have the coffee and some food ready for you in a few minutes."

"Forget the damned coffee."

"There's a child present."

"I just want to sleep, leave me alone."

She led him to the bedroom. He sat on the bed, staring down at his lax hands.

She smiled as little Sue streaked in after them. Marty watched the approach of the dark haired little child. He took her in his arms and tickled her tender cheeks with his rough beard.

"Papa—you hurt—hurt."

He kissed away the pain, and the child giggled and wet his nose and cheeks with great, smacking kisses.

Marty blew a hot breath against her flimsy little dress and she screeched with delight. "You burn me—Papa!"

He kissed her on the elbow and rubbed the spot with mock roughness.

"You rub—you rubt it off?" Big tears sparkled on her cheeks.

"Rubbing it in, little sweet pie. Now let Pa"—the word didn't come easily—"let me sleep."

Clara took the child into the other room and gave her a rag doll to amuse herself and returned to her husband.

Marty was sprawled over the orderly quilts. She pulled off his boots and for a moment she lay beside him.

"Marty—you're trembling." But he didn't hear.

Then she closely studied his haggard face. Oh Lord.

Marty's tired muscles twitched. A small tear bumped past her cheekbone and wasted itself. Then the little wheezing sounds came from his nostrils and open mouth.

She kissed the dry, bitter lips.

Billy Janner banged past the door and moved to the coffee pot which hissed on the little sheet-iron stove.

"Where th' rangoon was ya at?" yelped Charley Caker.

He drank the hot coffee.

"Billy! Where ya been?"

"Shut up. Where's the meat."

"Ain't got none." He laughed in his choking manner. "I got some eggs."

"Cook 'em."

"I et already."

"I'm tired, Charley, fry 'em for me."

"Me? Me cook fer a no good loafer? Me? Charley moved to the shelf which held the cooking utensils. He fried the eggs in silence while the tears streamed from his eyelids and splattered noisily over the heated stove. Then he placed the frying pan before the youth.

"Thanks, Charley."

"Boy, yer face makes me wanta cry."

Janner swore. "Then go wet the ground outside."

Charley Caker's old eyes were bulgin' with tears when he fled out the door.

Janner hardly noticed. The fresh warmth of the eggs were settling his stomach a bit. He needed sleep. That was it, sleep.

LON said, "It's no use, Arney. There was nobody out there when we got here. They musta followed us. They're out there now."

Dick shrugged. "They could've killed us at their camp. Why would they follow us here?"

Arney swore viciously. "Who knows what the hell an Injun's goin' to do?"

Ned turned from the door. "There's 'bout fifty of 'em in the clearing down there."

"We better pull out," said Lon.

"You got the guts to ride through 'em?" asked Arney softly.

"No."

"Then keep yore damned mouth shut. It's *their* move now and we can't do a blasted thing to hurry it up."

"Why don't yuh go an' talk to 'em?" said Ned.

Arney closed his eyes.

"I didn't mean nothin', Arn."

"Then keep yore mouth shut."

"Think Dake and Janner saw 'em?" asked Dick.

"Why don't yuh go an' tell 'em," Arney said dryly.

Dick walked out.

"Wake up, Billy," said Caker tremulously, "they—he—wants ta talk with ya."

Janner came awake as if he had been in some tortuous hell and the waking hand aiding him away from the torments.

"What?"

"It's me," said Dick. "Yuh better take a look outside."

"What's there?"

"White Stone an' his braves."

"What do they want?"

"Dunno. They just dis-mounted and are millin' 'round on the little level near the trail."

Janner got to his feet, strapped his Colts around his middle, followed Dick out into the brightness of a warm day.

"Yuh ain't goin' to talk to 'im, are yuh?"

"Yes."

"I better go warn Marty."

"No."

"Why? He gotta be warned. He's the one—"

"Let him sleep," cut in Janner. I'll see what White Stone wants around here."

Dick seldom had known fear of this kind. The abrupt terrors that swooped over the trail were something you knew how to protect yourself from.

He watched the tall, stiff shouldered kid walk toward the Indians. They made no hostile moves.

Janner raised his right hand, ignoring the hundred eyes that leveled with his body.

"What do you want, White Stone?"

"Want Mar—Marty. We go hunting with him. We friends. My people like him. Him great man."

"What?"

"He say my father kill himself. That true. We think about it. We like Marty. Tell him we go hunting with him. We know place where he can shoot many animals."

Janner smiled. "I'll go tell him."

Dick nearly fainted with relief when he heard the news. "I'll go tell Arney and th' boys. Won't they be glad to hear it!"

Janner went to Marty's cabin. Clara admitted him.

"I have to see Marty, Clara."

"He's sleeping."

"I'll have to wake him up."

"Please—he's so tired."

"Sorry."

"I'll get him."

MARTY'S face was drawn and sweat streaked. His mouth was a nasty slit. "Well?"

"White Stone wants you to go hunting with him."

The mouth weakened into a little

girlish O.

"He sounds peaceable enough. I told him I'd tell you."

"Where is he?"

"Outside in the clearing near the trail."

"Does he just want me?"

"Yes. He said you are a great man. He'll show you where you can shoot all kinds of animals."

Marty turned to Clara who didn't quite understand. It sounded innocent enough.

"Tell him I'll be out in a little while," said Marty. Then to Clara: "I won't be long, Clara, don't worry. He's a friendly Indian. We traded with him the other night."

"I'll make a peach pie for you," said Clara, pulling his head down for a farewell kiss.

"Good-by, Clara. Give Sue a kiss for me." But at that moment the little girl ran into the cabin.

Janner took his leave as the little girl jumped onto the boot toes of her new father and he pulled her up to his breast. "Give me a big kiss, Sweet Pie. C'mon."

The little lump of happiness complied. "Where—where—you—y o u—go—Papa?"

"For a little ride. Go'by."

"Good-by."

CHAPTER XIX

MARTY rode next to White Stone as they headed their gay party into the close shadows which the towering Guadalope blackly colored. White Stone didn't speak. His face was serenely composed, as one who has recently had his most ardent wish granted.

"Where's this great hunting place?" asked Marty.

"Near."

Marty grinned. You couldn't trust an Indian but they were like children in so many respects. So they adopted him as their hero for his ingenious method of murdering White Stone's father.

"It was as the gods willed," Marty said to White Stone. "The gods told me to let your father kill *himself*."

White Stone nodded.

The braves were laughing and waving their carbines and bows with happy cries to the skies.

Then White Stone brought his pony to a halt. There was the same set smile on his lips. The eyes were wet with an emotionless dull stare.

"We have feast first in great cave," said White Stone.

"Can't we just hunt?"

"No. You come with us."

They dismounted and some of the accompanying warriors led the ponies further into the mountain gloom.

They started upward. These were high Indians. He was a low white, a thieving, wretched Judas. They wanted him to go hunting with them. . . Maybe they just wanted him. It had been a clever trick. A brilliant trick.

But Indians enjoyed a good joke more than whites. *They had to.* Existence was one wild gamble for them. He would be a hero. He was.

It was an elaborate cave. There were the crude markings on the walls which depicted the bravery of some warriors. Fires sent the darkness away with long red fingers, obscuring the faces of the braves huddled about the fires which cooked the meats.

Somehow the food tasted better than his last repast with White Stone's father. There wasn't the earthy tang of Indian cooking about it.

"Cook special for you," said White Stone in his understandable, if broken English.

Marty thanked him.

Then the meal was over. It hadn't been a feast even by white man's standards.

"Stand please," said White Stone. And Marty complied.

Four braves carried the crude litter. The body of Frozen Face was upon it. The caked blood on his chest paved crooked ravines over his body.

"We bury him now," said White Stone. "Burial cave is near here."

Marty nodded. . . . Then horses were led into the cave. The brave leading the six ponies halted behind the litter. There followed erect warriors who walked in single file behind the ponies and took up their stations there. They bore arrows, bows, pistols, a rifle and bowls of corn meal, salt and flour.

"Those are my father's belongings," said White Stone. "He take them with him."

Marty nodded. *Clara. Oh Little Sue. Billy.*

"Those are the things he loved," said White Stone.

He couldn't bring his head into motion. Marty would have fallen on his face if he had been compelled to take a step forward. Great, tremulous nerves shook his legs—tongued into his belly. . . All this while his heart scraped against his ribs.

"We go now," said White Stone.

He stumbled after the chieftain's son. He fell once, twice, but the Indians didn't offer helping hands.

White Stone raised his hand and the procession came to a halt before the opening of what seemed to be another cave.

The braves carrying the corpse of Frozen Face were the first to enter the cave. Then the Indians leading the six ponies and the file of Redmen carrying the dead chieftain's personal effects.

White Stone motioned for Dake to enter the cave. He did.

It was a good sized cavern. In a sickly daze Marty watched the Indians foot-tie the six cringing ponies. The food, weapons and ceremonial robes were placed about the litter.

White Stone turned from the dead thing that had fathered him. He snarled an order.

Marty moved away from the approaching braves but he wasn't quick enough. His body wouldn't respond to the frantic commands of his brain. They pinned him to the ground and soon the butt of a rifle put him out of his misery.

HE WAS TIED to a stake in the ground. His arms and legs spread-eagled against rough boards. The smell of ponies, flour and Frozen Face left no doubt as to where he was.

The Indians stood about the cave. Their eyes never left his body.

White Stone smiled, walking slowly toward him. "This where my father's bones shall rest—with all of his treasured things."

"Yea—sure." He couldn't think.

"The ponies he loved," said White Stone. "His favorite bow, arrows, the salt he loved to shake on meat, a little flour. All these things my father loved. They are his. *You say so?"*

Sweat iced down Marty's face. He said yes.

The Indian unbuttoned Marty's jacket, unbuckled the gun-belts and pulled them from around his waist. He carried them to the bier of his father and placed them beside the stiff fingers.

"My father win guns. Those his. *You say so?"*

Marty didn't dare utter a word. Maybe. . . .

"You ready, paleface?"

"NO."

"You ready, son of black dog?"

"What do you mean?" He had a little left.

"My father is dead. It is right that what he love he take to Happy Hunting Ground with him. He won your rings, watches, shiny tobacco box, guns. All these things his. *You say so?"*

"Yes, those things are his."

"And you kill him?"

"I didn't."

"You say he kill himself?"

"Yes." God help me.

"Then he should take his arms with him. *You say so?"*

"Yes."

"You ready now?"

"What?" NO. . . . NO. . . .

"My father win your arms and legs. He kill himself with his guns. It is right that he go to Happy Hunting Ground with all of his arms and legs. *You say so?"*

"I—I—I. . . ."

Then it was clear. Just like that. Indians always collect their winnings. They played according to the rules. That was all. They played according to the rules. They always collected their winnings. . . .

He watched White Stone approach him with the axe. Nothing was moving inside of him. Nothing.

THEN: EVERYTHING SEEMED IMPORTANT. THOSE LITTLE PONIES WHO WERE GOING TO BE LEFT TO STARVE. THE LITTLE SPECK OF TREE THAT WAS VISIBLE THROUGH THE MOUTH OF THE CAVE. CLARA, SUE, BILLY, ARNEY, LON, DICK, NED.

"You ready now?"

White Stone seemed to enjoy the facial movements of his helpless prisoner.

Marty tried to move away but the ropes held him in place on the crude cross.

"Oh God, please, I'll do anything. Please—for God's sake."

The ropes were taut and extremely strong.

White Stone lifted the axe. It was coming down.

Maaaaaaaaaa.

IT HURTED—OH GOD IT WAS GOING TO HURT.

CHAPTER XX

"MEBBE he'll come back," slurred Arney Cordick. "Indians are harmless 'nough if yuh know how to handle 'em."

"They could've got us all when we was at their camp," said Dick. "Yuh can't git 'round thet!"

They agreed on that.

"Where's Janner?" asked Cordick.

"At Marty's house," replied Dick. "Thet little girl is purty's one of them color pitchers."

"Which one?" laughed Cordick.

"Whoa," yelped Lon. "Did Marty take his keg o' gold with 'im when we came back?"

"Dunno," said Dick, and Ned echoed his words.

"He didn't" Cordick said slowly.

Lon spat on the floor. "You would notice it."

"We better pull out," said Dick, "no use in stayin' here."

Cordick smiled. "Yuh boys only got ten percent each comin'—not a whole keg."

"There was six little kegs," said Lon, "we took as much chance as yuh."

"I said there would be ten per cent for each of yuh," Cordick said very gently.

"Reckon yuh got to do more'n ask

for it," said Lon.

Cordick shrugged. Their hands were over the butts of their Colts. He wouldn't have had much of a chance.

"Reckon everything's changed, fellers. I was jus' talkin'."

Lon smiled. "I was too. It's jus' natural like thet we all get an even share."

"Shore," drawled Arney Cordick. "I'll be takin' a little stroll for myself." He turned away and went out the door.

He waited until he was out of sight then doubled back to the cabin. He came up the side window. He yelled through the open window. "Boys—Injuns sneakin' up—git yore guns out!"

None of the three in the cabin was certain of their next move. Indians meant fighting. They drew and started for the door.

Grinning, Arney drew his pistols and opened with his Colts. They didn't have a chance. Lon managed to get off two shots but they were wild.

Arney Cordick dashed into the room. There were three kegs under the bunk. He carried two of them to the unlit stove; he quickly removed the stove covers and top attachment and dropped two of the kegs into the dead stove.

He waited for them to arrive.

Jed Nuler and Big North slammed through the cabin door.

Arney shook his head as if coming out of a daze. "They—they sold rifles to the high Injuns, go git th' Captain—tell 'im. I heard 'em an' they tried to git me. Lucky I was outside and had the protection of the walls."

Jed ran out, yelling for aid, while Big North eyed each other.

Cordick pointed to the money barrel that Big North hadn't noticed in his excitement. "There's the money they got for th' rifles."

Big North's mouth gaped. "Reckon we all owe yuh plenty, Arn. Guess we all had yuh patched wrong."

Arney nodded, seating himself on a chair. His eyes fell upon his three dead comrades. . . . Strange, theirs was a happy death. Quick, clean, no fuss. . . .

JANNER heard the details from Charley Caker.

"But I gotta be hurrin'," shrilled Caker. "The Genurul's takin' all th' men he kin get to go raid the high Injuns 'fore they kin git started with them rifles."

"You mean Captain Renbeck?"

"Ya—ya, th' Genurul."

In that frightened moment Janner guessed what had happened. Arney had killed Lon, Dick and Ned for the money and gave out the only story that would seem credible. Even leaving one of the kegs of gold to prove his integrity.

Janner rode out with the troopers and traders that made up the raiding party. They rode like demons. Arney had given the Captain the right directions.

Frozen Face's camp was intact. The empty wagons were found but the armed Indians didn't have a chance. They hadn't expected an attack. A few token shots were fired and they capitulated.

It was discovered that White Stone, their chief, wasn't in the vicinity.

"Thank God Cordick found out in time," said Captain Von Renbeck, "thank God."

One of the Indian captives said, "White Stone is burying his father."

The relieved men of the party felt the happiness leak through their mouths.

Arney was a hero. Janner couldn't say a word and not involve himself.

Billy guessed that the chief reason for their recapturing most of the rifles was because they were White Stone's property and he hadn't had time to distribute the rifles and bury his father at the same time—and with due respect.

"Marty's the real hero," thought Janner. "A real hero—and snakier than any general who ever won medals for getting his boots muddied up."

Janner returned to the hut that he and Caker shared. Guilt was merely a word to him.

Until this moment he hadn't really realized fully what *two thousand* rifles in the hands of *two thousand* Redmen meant. He soon was glad that things had loosened up in this fine manner.

Caker fiddled around the stove. "Let's eat, huh, Billy!"

"No. I'm not hungry." He left the old man and walked aimlessly about the paths. But it pulled him back. Something that was stronger than the gentle promise of a woman.

He hurried back to the cabin and went into the little stable behind the hut. He buried his keg of gold pieces under the straw. He sat, hunched over, looking at the spot where the keg lay hidden. He stood in that position for a long while.

He had to do it—he had to. That would sort of even things up with the Big Feller upstairs.

Then he went in search of Arney Cordick. He didn't find him.

CHAPTER XXI

ARNEY CORDICK shot the pony over the Indian trail with reckless speed. He rode like the devil with only one aim—to get away from the Guadalope as fast as he could.

Three kegs of gold were strapped behind the saddle, covered with his slicker. Deep in his heart he couldn't dispel with the fear that the weighty little kegs were cutting down his speed. But his daring horsemanship made up for this fearsome weight.

He stopped only to rest the heaving little pony. He knew the risk he was running, riding alone through Indian Territory, but that was one of his professional hazards and he well knew it. If he'd been an honest man he would have had an unflinching faith in God. As it was he trusted to black luck and the cast iron will of Arney Cordick.

Like most famed gunmen he had the capacity to get out of himself and admire or correct Arney Cordick. He thought he was one hell of a fellow who succeeded because there wasn't any other way for him to get ahead in the world. He liked it this way, and guessed that if the situation wasn't so, his regard for Arney Cordick wouldn't have been lowered one tiny bit.

His plan was simple; once he'd cleared this territory he'd head for New York and join his brother. He'd live an orderly life with some orderly woman and be close to the only person on his cherished globe who loved him.

Arney really had no religion for the simple reason that he hadn't inherited any from his folks. Mother had read the bible to him during his muddled boyhood but that had been almost worse than receiving a whipping.

There hadn't been any churches to be dragged to—and no other little boys to show any respect for the Big Feller. That might have helped Arney, but he had led as interesting a life as anybody. And in that secret, ticking compartment he was wont to push down the exciting idea that when he did pass on the devil would have some post for him to fill.

Arney stopped the pony. He stuck to the open trails, not even thinking of slanting off through the many thickets.

Speed was the command and he didn't try to cover his charge across the prairies.

He was jogging the rested mount into motion when the animal pitched forward. Before the snarl of the rifle hit his ears he had snatched the rifle from the boot and was rolling to the ground.

He knew what he must do. He flattened out behind the protection of the dead pony and carefully fired at the screaming Redmen who raced their ponies toward him. His shots found marks. Three ponies dropped like paper animals from a giant gust of air. One Indian was trapped under the weight of his pony.

The other Indians darted behind the cover of a fringe of trees. The Indian who was helplessly held to the ground flattened himself against the browness of the terrain. His right leg was under the horse's belly. He was a quivering mass of muscle from his hopeless exertions of trying to free himself.

But Arney was forced to keep his eyes on the six or seven braves who kept shaking the dead horse with volleys of gun-fire.

His face was pale as ice. He felt hot streaks of panic shoot deeply into his bowels. But he had to remain cool. . . Had to remain cool. If he lost his nerve he was lost. . .

The firing ceased and Arney knew what was taking place. The Indians were debating whether to charge his position or not. The Redman was the type of warrior who thought the bullet would find him, not his comrade.

"AND," said Arney, merely to hear his voice, "I'm as well protected as I could've hoped for." And that was true. It was a clear prairie with no thickets for the Indians to drop into and then pepper him with shot and arrows. If they wanted him they would have to charge over the running, dead blood of his horse. And Arney remembered the case of a fellow outlaw who'd held off an entire posse for hours from the vantage point of his fallen mount and then escaped during the blackness of night.

NIGHT! Arney looked at the sky. Yeh! Yeh! At best there was an hour of good shooting light left. If he could hold them off for an hour he culd get away. They wouldn't charge in the dark and he could sneak away.

He couldn't see that Injun. The Injun that'd been pinned under the pony. No, it was only the increasing gloom of nightfall. What if that buck got *away?* He could be any one of the reddish mounds around him.

Arney triggered, then stopped. No, hell, he hadn't lost his nerve. "Take yore time, Arney. Take yore time."

He rested his eyes for a moment then carefully studied the fallen Indian pony which lay about an eighth of a mile away. He saw the slight movement. It could have been the wind rustling the sage but he fired and the rusty blur seemed to slide away. He fired again and again. The reddish lump didn't move again.

He grinned. The saddle and kegs gave him plenty of protection when he returned the fire of the cautious Indians.

They weren't going to charge.

"Minutes."

He lifted his hat. It was pushed aside by a splendid shot.

Minutes.

They weren't going to charge. There weren't enough of them. Even if there were they wouldn't charge. He said that to himself over and over again.

The terrible minute: It came with the suddenness of an itch; what if he didn't sneak away? What if he were winged? What if he were killed? What if he were captured?

He had no way of judging time.

Then they open fire. Great whining pellets stroked the ground about him, thudded against the softness of the pony's flesh, splintered the kegs and caroomed from the saddle.

For a helpless minute he didn't have the courage to run his hands over his head, chest, stomach or legs. He shook his legs a little. He wasn't hit.

Then he realized that the Indians were making one final attempt to erase him with volleys of desperation. . . Because now it was thick and chill with darkness. Shadows were everywhere. It was time to leave.

HE RELOADED the rifle and began to inch backward on his stomach. A slow fear rocked his belly as the bullet battered hulk of his pony seemed to grow in height as he backed away. He stopped. He crawled frantically back to the pony, peered into the darkness. He'd almost forgotten the kegs. He dropped the rifle. The kegs could be strapped to his back. They were his reasons for living.

He undid the one nearest him then with painful caution managed to get the one on the horse's rump. He waited for a long while, then inched around the horse. He choked with fear as his face touched the silky strands of the pany's tail. He had to get that other keg.

His fingers felt the hardness of the cask. It was partly under the ripped belly of the horse. He had to crawl before the hairy breast-work. He had to use both hands in order to pull the keg form under the thousand or so pounds of the animal.

Flat on his stomach he pulled at the keg but he couldn't budge it. In desperation he slid to his knees and pulled. It was giving. He pulled again. . . Here it came!

He didn't hear the report of the rifle shot that pushed him against the equally dead horse. He didn't hear the skying shrieks of the Indian who lay an eighth of a mile away from him or the mates of that Redman when they freed him from the crushing weight of the pony.

The Indian who had been pinned under the horse couldn't walk. He dragged himself along the ground, leaving a glistening trail in the early evening darkness from the wounds which Arney had inflicted upon him with crossfire.

The Indians skirted the dead white man and his horse. The hero scraped along the ground on his belly, proudly proclaiming that his shot had killed the paleface.

"Gold buy many ponies," said the hero.

"And many squaws."

"And many jugs of tizwin."

"And much happiness."

They carried their hero and loot away into the soft blackness.

CHAPTER XXII

JANNER couldn't console Clara. She believed Marty to be dead and that was the opinion of the outpost.

"All of those devils are on the warpath now," she said. "What chance has Marty?"

Janner knew he had none—once White Stone learned of Cordick's treachery. He would naturally hold Marty as responsible also.

He was saying the usual inane things when Charley Caker burst into the room.

"Billy—come on—Billy!"

"What's happened?"

"Come on!"

"Da—all right." He politely excused

himself from Clara's presence and followed Caker out into the brilliant sunlight.

"What is it, Charley?"

"I don't rightly know, Billy. Honest to Gawd!"

Janner roughly shook the old trader. "Spit it out."

"Down by the little cabin."

"What cabin?"

"Th' one ya—ya an' Marty usta live in."

There was a group of men, including Lt. Screenman and some troopers, gathered about some small object. It couldn't have been more than two or three feet in length.

They made way for him. Nobody said a word.

He looked down at the tattered hunk of flesh. It was the trunk of a man with no legs, head or arms. It was Marty.

"Those devils," said Screenman.

Janner swayed. He felt the brush of bodies and arms holding him erect.

"I'll tell Mrs. Dake," said Lt. Screenman.

"No," choked out Janner. "Don't."

"All right," Screenman said softly.

"Tell her you know he's dead—but don't let her see this—him—like this."

Lt. Screenman nodded. "That's an excellent move. We can bury him and tell Mrs. Dake that we saw him fall in battle with the Indians."

"Yes," said Janner.

"Here, take a pour of this," said a friendly voice and the forty-rod burned the spleen from his throat. It forked into his belly.

"Wait," called Billy to Screenman. "I'll tell her."

Lt. Screenman shrugged. "All right."

The tears didn't come. She had known it was like this. She knew her luck.

"I'll leave with Sue when travel is possible," she said. There wasn't any tone to her voice. She had been jabbed with the lance of despair once too often.

"Yu'll leave with me," said Billy. "We'll get married, Clara."

"Yes."

"He was all I had too, guess you know that."

The smile filled her face, gradually crawled into her eyes. "Oh, Billy. . . ."

He held her tightly, feeling the rummage of emotions. Great, honest tears fell from her swollen eyelids. She was Clara again—and she was his woman now.

"I won't stay out here, Bill."

"I'll take care of you and Sue," he said. "You'll never have to worry again."

"There're other territories."

"Let's go East."

"No." It shot up from the depths of his soul. *"It* took everything away from us. We'll take something out of *It."*

"It?" Her eyes were wide with compassion.

"This country is young, fresh, rich. We'll get a small ranch. We don't belong any other place, Clara. Everything we loved is here."

She drew closer to him.

"We'll leave this section soon as we can," he said. "Montana, the Arizona territory. The west is big."

She kissed his cheek.

THAT night Janner went to the stable behind Caker's hut. He unearthed the little keg. He carried it to Lt. Screenman's quarters.

"Billy—come in."

"I came to say good-by."

"Reckon that's sensible, Billy."

"You must do me a favor." He had to do it. It was difficult but it was the only way. Then he could forget. Janner told himself he had to do it.

"If I'm able," replied Screenman.

"As a soldier you'll get to see some pretty big officials, won't you?"

"When I have my leave, yes."

Janner smiled. Placed the keg on the writing table. "There's about twenty or so thousand dollars in that keg, Lieutenant. I want you to use it to get a man out of prison."

"What!"

"Yes. His name is Fred Dirk. He's in the Territorial Prison. Everybody knows him as Old Fred. He never did anything real bad. Just got caught at it once too often. He's an old man. A little gold might bring out the true ore in some big shot's being. Will you try?"

Screenman studied the youth. "I will." He realized that they were of about the same years.

"Thanks."

"I don't think it'll cost this much."

"Do as you want with the rest."

"I'm a soldier." He grinned. "Won't have time to spend it all."

"Give it to some dead soldier's family."

"That's best."

"Good-by, Lieutenant. Maybe I can do you a favor someday."

"You just did."

tended hand, and left.

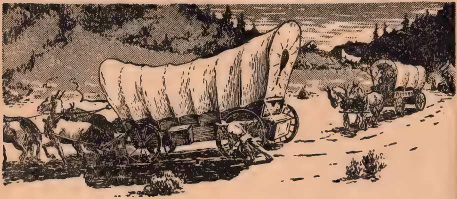
Janner smiled weakly, shook the ex-Lt. Screenman counted seventeen thousand dollars. . . He wouldn't inform the Captain of this mission of his. The Captain would figure on some other method of freeing Old Fred. . . No, he was playing this one as Janner wanted, and when he had a chance he'd anonymously donate whatever money remained to the worthy charity.

He felt like a new man. He wished that Marty had found a happier sphere of operations. The Indian heaven was as good as any. . . As good as any. . .

FREIGHTERS TO THE WEST

by CHARLES RECOUR

Mule-skinners used more than tough language!



BEFORE the railroads penetrated the West, necessary supplies and equipment were carried to the pioneer residents of the new country by means of pack trains. Many tons of freight were transported in this way, in spite of a great many obstacles encountered along the trail, ranging from rough roads to hostile Indians.

A pack train might consist of several freighters, each drawn by twelve, sixteen, or even twenty mules or horses. Each freighter consisted of a great lead wagon, one or two freight wagons, and a smaller wagon at the rear carrying supplies needed on the journey. The cargo wagons were of tremendous size. The lead would carry four or five tons of freight, the trailers three or four tons apiece.

One man, called the swamper, always rode the wagons to watch the loads. An important part of his job was to keep a continual lookout for the possibility of attack by Indians or robbers, and he was heavily armed. There was a herder, or "wrangler," along, whose duty was to care for the horses, mules or oxen. Except where there was no grass, the animals were allowed to graze during the nights, and the herder was constantly alert to protect his valuable charges.

The most important man in the pack train was the driver, often called the mule-skinner. He had to be experienced in the art of driving such a large team. Since the gait was usually slow, around three miles an hour, the driver often walked beside the wheelers, the animals nearest the wagon. Or he would ride one of the mules of the wheel team.

The huge team was driven with a single rein, called a jerk line. This line was run through the left bit of each animal, which were trained to respond to various signals. A long, steady pull on the line would turn the team to the left, a series of short jerks meant to turn right, and so on. The lead animals, especially, had to be thoroughly educated in order to be part of a successful large team. The leaders were usually small animals, chosen for alertness and intelligence, and then trained for months or years. When qualified to lead a twenty-mule team, they were priceless, and were treated with the utmost respect by their handlers. The wheel team was the heaviest and strongest of the animals, for theirs was the greatest burden.

A good driver did not overdrive his stock, but carefully considered their abilities, and the task before them. He saw to it that their harness was comfortable, and that they were adequately fed and watered. He did not use the whip oftener than necessary. If an animal shirked, or if an emergency required speed from the team, then the driver earned the title of mule-skinner. By use of blacksnake whip or trace chain, and verbal abuse hurled at the top of his voice, he could exact instant response from his beasts.

Starting a team of many animals fastened to a load of many tons was in itself an art. After the animals were all in place and the wagons were ready to go, the master driver would start talking to the beasts. Calling the different ones by name, he would continue talking in a friendly, encouraging way. Gradually, his words would become more sharp and rapid, until each animal was alert and responsive. Then suddenly, like the crack of a whip, would come the command to move, and the twelve, or sixteen, or twenty beasts would lunge forward as one; and the heavily loaded wagons would start off smoothly.

Ordinarily, the gait was steady and fairly slow. A good day's journey was fifteen miles, even if the outfit had to make its own trail as it went along. The heavy tires of the lead wagon, sometimes six inches across, made a well-packed road for the following wagons.

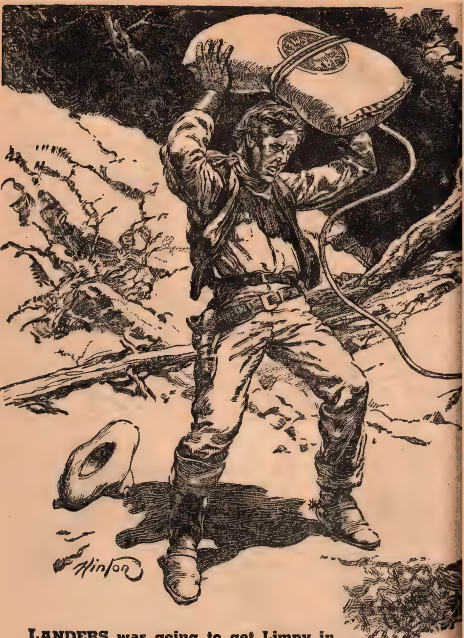
Sometimes smaller teams were advisable. A four or six mule team, if not too heavily loaded, could go five or more miles a day further than the larger outfits. If the journey was to include a stretch of mountainous country, then the long teams driven by a jerk line could not be used. These long teams could be turned only gradually, since in turning at anything like a right angle, the weight of the load would fall on only the last two or four animals. Therefore, when a very crooked road must be followed, or on the mountains, smaller teams had to be used.

The journey of a pack train was full of discomforts. If it followed a well-marked trail, the dust would rise like a heavy fog, stifling to both man and beast. Hub-deep ruts, chuck holes, occasional shortages of water and forage, floods and tornadoes were taken as a matter of course, and coped with efficiently. Perils which could not be taken philosophically were the ever-present danger of Indian attacks, and hold-ups by the road agents who roamed the West in search of plunder. These white robbers had no compunctions about murder in order to gain their ends. The main reason the freighters travelled in groups was for protection against these men, and the Indians. The Apaches, especially, were greatly feared for the savagery of their attacks, and the terrible atrocities committed upon those unfortunate enough to fall into their hands.

The most famous route used by freighters to the West was the Santa Fe Trail. This became a well marked road between Independence, Missouri, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, which stage coaches and freight wagons used for many years.

The long wagon trains pushed their way into the West over this and many other routes, and with determination and indomitable courage surmounted all obstacles in bringing necessities from the East into the young and growing West. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, these slow but sure methods of transportation gave way to progress, in the shape of the railway trains on their great steel highways, conveyance infinitely swifter, surer, and more efficient. But for a century or more, the freighters, toiling doggedly into the West, were an important factor in the development of the new country.

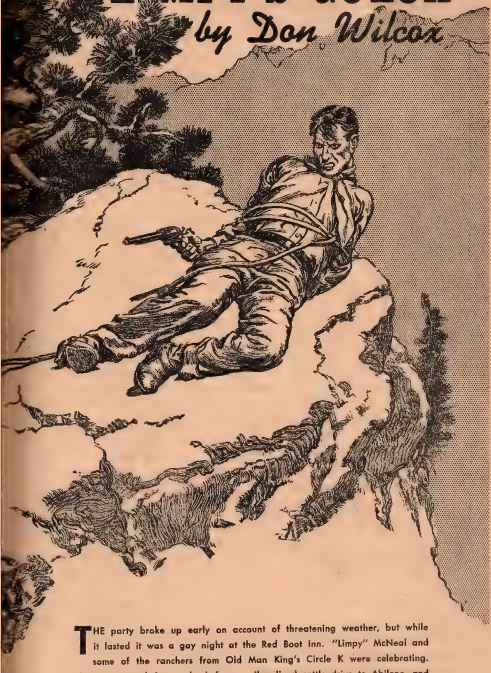
COMING IN MAMMOTH WESTERN—AUGUST
"THE BROKEN LANCE"
By FRANK GRUBER



LANDERS was going to get Limpy in one way or another, but he forgot two things – Limpy was a first class fighter and Wanda did her share!

LIMPY'S GULCH

by Don Wilcox



THE party broke up early on account of threatening weather, but while it lasted it was a gay night at the Red Boot Inn. "Limpy" McNeal and some of the ranchers from Old Man King's Circle K were celebrating. They were on their way back from a silver-lined cattle drive to Abilene, and another hour's ride from Red Boot would see them back in their ranch house on the edge of the canyon.

the fulfillment of a ten-year ambition. The packet inside his coat contained a nice warm check which would finish paying W. W. King for the small ranch across the canyon from the Circle K.

"Here's to Limpy!" one of the King brothers sang out. "He's about to own the neatest damn' one-man ranch in the valley—Limpy's Gulch!"

Limpy grinned and pushed his new white Stetson back to reveal his shock of thick brown hair, glinting red under the orange colored lamps above the bar. He took a hobbling sideward step, partly suporting himself from his elbow. The liquor was good and the mahogany counter was bright with glasses and bottles. And in his pocket, alongside his check for Old Man King, there rested a nice cozy six thousand two hundred dollars in bills.

"Speech, Limpy!"

"Well, boys, it's a great feelin' and you've all been great to me—and this is a great evening—and—"

"That's great, Limpy. Keep it up!"

"—and so all I can say is, thanks to you all, and fill 'em up!"

The applause of shouts and bumping glassware attested that it was a "great" speech.

"Is everyone drinkin'?" Limpy called out. "Give them folks at the table a round while you're at it. This is my night."

Limpy could almost forget, tonight, that he's had a bad break ten years ago, when he was only twenty-two and a green cowhand. He's taken a bad spill with a horse and had come out of it with a crushed left foot that would be his for life. And after that bad fortune he'd never been able to hold his own with the other riders of King's empire of grass and sagebrush.

But he had proved his stamina, with the passing years, by working and saving until he'd earned his own little eighty acres—just a small handful of choice grass in a gulch at the edge of the canyon. Nature had scooped out that gulch and planted it and trimmed it up just right for a one-man ranch.

In the past year Limpy had built his own rock and log shanty, tight against the cliff out of the north wind; and for the past three months he'd been living in it, getting started on a small scale while he rounded out his final season for King.

"Fill 'em up," Limpy called out. "And you, round boy over there, keep your music goin'. As long as the management don't complain—"

The concertina was going again, and a dozen or more glasses clinked in rhythm.

"Hope you're in no hurry to get home, Joe," Limpy said, turning to one of the King brothers at his elbow. "I reckon nobody worries if we don't get home till after dark!"

Joe King allowed that no one would worry if they didn't get home at all. Just so it didn't rain—that was all he cared. Black clouds had swallowed up the sunset an hour ago.

"Hell, what's a little wetness on the outside when we're already soaked on the inside?" one of the cowpunchers said, and guffawed over his joke; then he drank again and repeated his words and laughed bigger than ever, slapping a couple of his comrades on the back to clinch his reputation as a humorist. "I say, let 'er rain. What's a little wetness on the outside?"

IN A shadowed corner, against the background of a four-foot stock dealer's calendar full of big black numbers for the month of October, there sat one sullen cowman who appeared to prefer his own company. He was dealing himself successive hands of solitaire, though there was hardly enough light to see the cards. He strained over the table with hard brooding eyes and deep comma-shaped lines in his clean-shaven olive cheeks, apparently oblivious to the celebrating.

He might have been called by name by a few men at the bar; but his name—which was Landers—would have meant little. He was a newcomer, comparatively speaking, and no one had paid much attention to him because he was quiet and melancholy. He worked somewhere thirty or forty miles up the canyon, and seldom came to Red Boot.

Sourface Landers was only one of several strays among the Red Boot crowd, but he happened to be the one who rated table service with the compliments of the chubby fellow playing the concertina.

The amateur musician, perhaps attracted by his dark and cheerless look, carried a drink over to him. He set the glass down on Landers' table. At the same time he kept a few idle trailings of melody wheezing from the instrument.

Landers looked up at the self-appointed waiter. "How'd you know I wanted to talk with you?"

"I figured you could use a drink."

"You thinkin' the same thing I am? Is that it?"

"How do I know what you're thinkin'?"

"That fellow McNeal ought to be easy game, huh? Him with the hobble. He's likely carryin' a fat roll."

"All of 'em," said the concertina player. "The King brothers, especially. They're just gettin' back from a drive to Abilene. I saw 'em go through with a whole valley full of longhorns."

The concertina teaser struck a new chord and fished among the notes for a new tune to settle on. He started away but the solitaire player crooked a finger at him.

"How much you reckon this Limpy McNeal has got on him?"

"Whatcha askin' me for? He's prob'ly put it in a check for Old Man King."

"Hell, you can tell he's lined, the way he's spillin' it around." Landers snapped his cards to the table as if with decision. He detained the music maker with his eye, sipping his drink slowly. Then, "Well, how about it?"

"Deal your cards, friend. I'm no mind reader."

Landers gave a surly snort. "Hell, you know what I mean. You and I together could lift a little of that dazzle off'n him as easy as one-two-three."

"Huh?" The concertina player struck a handful of clinkers that couldn't have been intentional. "What makes you think you can talk to me that way?"

LANDERS motioned him closer, and gestured for a bar of rests from the concertina. "I seen you work a deal back in Kansas City, that's why. I like the way you work. You're cool. They call you Pard, don't they?"

The musician nodded. "Pard Bannister. An' I got a nice clean reputation around here so far. I've forgot all about Kansas City."

"Clean reputation, huh? Well, don't be soilin' your hands with any honest labor. There's easier ways, as we both know."

"What's your deal?"

"Later," said Landers under his breath. "Give 'em some more tunes."

Someone at the bar was waiting for more music. Pard Bannister waved his short fat arms and went to it with an upsweeping melody like a chariot race. He sauntered along the tables with a casual air, as if he'd been playing all the time. He paused halfway down the line where the proprietor of the Red Boot sat entertaining a female friend

She was a buxom, bejewelled blonde, overly full of idle chatter, and from the way the proprietor kept smoothing his drooping mustaches, anyone could tell he was finding it a dull way to pass the time. He appeared relieved to let the passing musician break in on their conversation.

"You're gettin' good on that joy-box, Pard. Next thing you know you'll be askin' me for a job."

Bannister chuckled between notes. "Nope. Me, I never work. I've never yet asked no one to hire me. Jis' tolerate me, tha's all I ask."

The blonde belle scowled at him. In her eyes he was too fat, and she didn't care for double chins; they reminded her of her own troubles in front of the mirror.

"It sounds better from a distance," she said.

The proprietor waved Pard Bannister on his way and he wandered back to the bar.

Later, Bannister finished his conversation with Sourface Landers outdoors by the hitching rack. The mellow lights of the inn glowed across Landers' dark, brooding face. His narrow eyes opened wider against the darkness, and Bannister felt that he was talking with a different Landers. But this was the stranger no longer insulating himself against a crowd, a man on the verge of action. He talked low and fast.

"As long as you live in Shattersville, the boys won't think nothing of it if you ride along with 'em that far."

"I ain't one of 'em," said Bannister, "but I reckon I ain't p'ison to 'em."

"But before you get to Shattersville, I'll bust in on the party, and you'll play your hand from the inside, see?"

"Go on."

"Remember the pass where you have to narrow down to single file just before you come on the Shattersville flat."

"Sure. The trail turns through a couple of steep rocks."

"Like dogs' teeth. Like boats upended. That's where I'll be hidin'."

"If there's eight or ten of us, I'm damned if I see how you'll know which is which on a blank night. You get yourself mixed up with the King brothers and you can count me out."

"No, I don't want that. Listen. You can signal me," Landers explained. "You hang alongside Limpy and see to it that the two of you are trailin' well behind the Kings and the others. Keep that music box goin', an' whatever you're playing, see, you change to 'Oh Susannah!' just as Limpy starts through the rocks. That's my signal. I'll step out and cover the two of you."

"Yeah. Oh Susannah."

"Got it?"

"Sure."

"All right. They'll take after me, and you'll join 'em, see?"

"Yes, you'll get your fool self shot, too. I can see you rollin' in the sand with a mouthful of lead teeth crowdin' in on your brain."

"Not if you give me a decent start," Landers said. "You gotta play it wise when they start out over the uplands after me. The next time you see me, then, I'll be sittin' here in the Red Boot, playin' solitaire. See?"

"Fifty-fifty, huh?"

"That's the deal."

"An' no loose gunplay?"

"Hell, I ain't no amateur. You leave the artistic end to me an' we'll get along fine."

CHAPTER II

THE night was a muddy purple, with angry flares of lightning cracking close over the upland. Limpy McNeal, feeling warm-hearted toward the whole world, even to the storm clouds hummed a tune in harmony with the notes of the concertina. The six ranchers from the Circle K moved along ahead of him. The roly-poly music maker had caught up with the party as they were galloping out of Red Boot, and his lazy music came through the darkness in jerky notes punctuated by the trotting of the horse.

Limpy's black mare knew the trail well enough to keep pace, but she was a trifle nervous over the storm, and he kept a tight rein. The whole party rode with the air of renegades who had drunk too long and were about to be punished by a downpour from the skies.

Single file they treaded their way through the narrow pass that led down to the Shattersville flat.

"Wonder if that darned music maker knows he's stringin' along with us, or is he unconscious?" one of the King ranch hands remarked. "He's more sociable than I ever saw him before. Sometimes I get a notion they highhat us because we're the best damned ranch in the valley."

Joe King mused idly over the observation. His father's ranch was popular enough with the other ranchers. It was true that some of the crews felt a natural jealousy toward King men because of the better pay on the King ranch. But the main thing was that Old Man King had fought his way to a position of respect in the valley because of his fair play and good ranching. There was hardly a man in the Red Boot tonight, Joe thought, who hadn't in some way expressed his good will toward the King outfit. If there had been any enemies present, they must have been drifters. Even that fellow Landers—the dark, brooding husky fellow who played solitaire—had mentioned to Joe that he might come over for a little trading sometime. He lived far enough away that he mightn't get around yet this fall; but maybe next spring.

Young Joe King's thoughts were interrupted by a close crash of thunder. It clattered like ripping wood, and right in the middle of it was a concussion that sounded for all the world like a shot.

A few minutes before that crash, Limpy McNeal had been lost in maverick thoughts straying out from the bars of music. The concertina was giving forth a jerky version of Yankee Doodle. Limpy tried unsuccessfully to piece together the words of the second verse.

He could barely see the heavier black shadows of the rocks as he started down into the pass. But a faint streak of lightning opened the way for him. Just then Bannister's tune changed to a lively rendition of "Oh Susannah!"

Limpy looked back into the blackness and was about to shout a complaint at the music maker for breaking off in the middle of a tune. But just then a glorious blaze of lightning came. The flare gave Limpy a blurry glimpse of something sinister. A horse and rider hiding in the crevice. The man had a pistol. He was aiming.

All in a quick blurry glimpse. Then blackness. Limpy reached for his gun, but he was too late. A bullet plunged into his back.

He was whirling about as it happened. The flash of gunfire, the resounding bang, and a deadly roar of inevitable thunder all came at once. And all of it was a tardy echo of the doom that had already struck.

LIMPY writhed. It was as if a white-hot branding iron had been plunged into his flesh, right against the backbone, and the sparks were flowing through a million nerves. He tried to cry out and couldn't. He writhed and then began to sink. He was falling over the saddle, trying to hook his elbow over the horn. He was going down.

Hands were diving into his pocket. He had a fleeting mental picture of his ranch. It was flying away from him. Someone was riding off with it. Things were going out in all directions. His head was swimming away in blackness. His body was plunging into fire. His life was being flown away on a flicker of lightning. Blackness, blackness . . . and the torturing branding irons that gripped his spine went cold, and his flesh was frozen into deadly ice.

The cowboys came riding back to Limpy, shouting. "Where's Limpy? Where'd that flash come from? Who the hell was doing the shooting?"

"Speak up, Limpy! What the devil? Are you hurt?"

"Hell, someone's shot him. Hey, you, Bannister? What happened to that damned drunken musician?"

"Here I am," Bannister called back, now riding up through the blackness. "There's someone in those rocks. I saw him by the lightning. Watch over there."

"Watch, hell. We're too late. Listen!"

Hoofbeats were pounding away toward the upland.

"Hold on to Limpy, there, someone. Here, Joe. Give us a hand. Where'd they hit you, Limpy? . . . Hell, he's gone."

"Yeah, his money's gone, too. He had it in this pocket."

"Come on, then!" Pard Bannister yelled. "We'll run the lousy thief into the hills and burn the guts outa him! Come on!"

Bannister tossed his concertina to the rocks, and before it had exhausted itself with a weird whine, he and four others were heading back over the trail to the upland. Their hoofbeats were swallowed up in a roll of thunder.

The rain fell in torrents. The boys from the Circle K fanned out in different directions, and one of them rode straight back to Red Boot to spread the alarm. In the hurry-scurry of getting home through the rainstorm, no one was too optimistic about the chances of running down a murderer on horseback—especially a murderer who couldn't be identified.

"You better leave it to the sheriff," the bartender said.

And the sheriff said, "We'll have to wait for daylight. Otherwise we'll run around in this storm shootin' each other. You got any suspicions?"

"Hell, Limpy never had no enemies," one of the King brothers declared. "But anyone who was drinkin' here tonight couldn't help knowin' there'd be ready cash."

"I can't figure who'd shoot a man in the back fer it," said the sheriff, "but we'll run him down and hang him fast."

BANNISTER was among the foolhardy few who couldn't be bothered by the rain or the darkness. They went on through the night, following a trail to the south. Eventually they overtook a couple of traders camping under a ledge, who declared they were heading down toward the Santa Fe Trail.

One of the traders recollected that a lone rider had passed that way a couple hours earlier, just as the rain was starting.

"If he's your man," the trader said, "he's probably still going south. If he ain't your man, he's most likely stopped and took shelter from the rain. No man in his right mind keeps ridin' in a storm like this unless he's in a godawful hurry."

Bannister was all for following on south. But one of King's cowpunchers turned the party back.

"We jis' as well use our heads an' save our saddle leather. Whoever done it was someone that joined Limpy at the bar an' took out over the Shattersville trail before we broke up. That means it ain't no maverick, but some native who knows the trails and knows Limpy's easy ways. We jis' as well go back an' call the roll."

The following morning Sourface Landers was one of several men who gathered around the sheriff's front porch to volunteer all the suggestions that might be helpful.

"Landers, you're more or less a foreigner to this town, judgin' by the amount of money you don't spend when you drift into the Red Boot," the sheriff said casually. "You got any ideas, as an outside observer, so to speak?"

"I got a couple," Landers said, looking up under his half-closed eyelids. The comma lines in his hard olive cheeks deepened as he measured his words. "Two or three times through the evenin' I had my eye on a couple Santa Fe traders who was passin' through on their way south. I figured they might be fillin' their wagon with anything handy. So I went out early an' checked up on my own wagon which was loaded with merchandise from Leary's. Then I see the rain comin' an' I took off fer home."

"You got a wagon here?"

"It was here last night. A one-hoss cart which I bought from a Mormon. I drove back almost to Shady Grove last night before the rain caught me. Then I pulled under a cliff."

Someone spoke up and said he'd seen the cart tracks. When the sheriff learned that Landers had later parked his cart at Shady Grove and unhitched so he could ride back and see about last night's trouble, the sheriff checked him off the list without any further questions.

The extra question sessions came round Bannister's way. Every time he told his original version of the shooting, he enlarged upon it until it gained fabulous proportions. But it boiled down, in the sheriff's mind, to a few simple facts, none of them much help. The figure of a rider coming out of hiding, momentarily revealed by the lightning. The roar of thunder, the sound of gunfire. More blackness, and then the hoofbeats of a getaway. A hot pursuit, foiled by the rain and the blackness of the night.

No means of identifying the murderer developed. The sheriff and his men searched the scene of the shooting. All they found was a water-stained concertina which Bannister had dropped when he joined the chase—a detail that attested to his irresponsible excitement, as the sheriff interpreted it.

BANNISTER stepped down from the sheriff's porch casually and sauntered across toward the Red Boot Inn, trying not to reveal in his step or the swing of his arms his immense relief. Now for a drink with Sourface Landers . . . if there were no prying eyes.

But Landers was nowhere to be seen. He had already mounted to ride back to Shady Grove. He would pick up his cart there and amble on up the canyon where he belonged. And it wouldn't do for Pard Bannister to go training after him.

Bannister brought a drink and moped over it for half an hour undisturbed. In his mind two questions burned bright.

Why, he asked himself, did Landers have to be so damned rash and let his gun go off? He could have pulled the deal with a simple hold-up. Limpy needn't have been shot at all, much less shot in the back. Whe whole valley was on edge over that, and Bannister figured that the minute the truth leaked out there'd be a quick hanging. Maybe a double hanging.

But if the facts didn't leak out, and if the thing blew over in three or four months—well, there was Bannister's second question. It scared him but it kept pounding for an answer. When would he get his share of the cash?

CHAPTER III

THE weirdest of that weird night's events was perhaps the fact that Limpy McNeal didn't die immediately.

Limpy spent a night of dying, but he didn't die. He groaned and moaned in pain, and faded away as if in the last moments of life. But by the time they got him back to the Circle K ranch house, there was still a slight flicker in him.

"Listen to him talk," Joe King said for the sixth time. "He's gettin' a whole lifetime of talk outa his system in the last hour."

In his delirium, Limpy unloaded a fanciful picture of the big ranch he meant to own some day. The feverish dream went off on strange tangents, and Joe King and his wife wouldn't have been surprised if he had talked of raising herds of kangaroos or elephants instead of cattle. His five or ten thousand acres ran wild with Indian ponies; he had a limitless water supply that all but ran uphill; his riders were all champions with the rope, and his horses *had* to be strong to bear up under the weight of all the gold and silver ornaments on the saddles.

While the doctor treated his wound and plastered him tight with bandages, Limpy unfolded the imaginary picture of the beautiful dark haired girl he expected to marry. And the houseful of bright eyed kids he expected to raise.

But the girl, as Joe King observed to Sarah King, was only a figment of a cowboy's dream—someone Limpy hadn't met yet, but had expected to find, sooner or later, in Abilene or Kansas City, the next time he went in with a herd.

In the dim lamp light Joe King shook his head and smiled sadly. There would never be quite so much of anything for anybody, he dicided, as Limpy was envisioning in his last hours.

"Take it easy, Limpy," Joe said quietly. "You're on your way to your last ride, I reckon. Too bad you couldn't go on. You was off to a good start, Limpy, but you had hard luck."

The doctor gave Limpy something to quiet him, and then turned. He had done about all he could do, he said. He had decided at once that he wouldn't try to remove the bullet. It was imbedded in too many thousand vital nerves, and there was no point in turning Limpy into a mad man for his last lingering hours.

When the rain ceased, the doctor left.

"There's too much cool breeze coming in this back room," Sarah King said. "We'd better get the red blanket off the couch."

Joe King closed the outside door that had been left ajar.

Wanda, the Indian girl, brought the scarlet blanket from the couch and laid it over Limpy carefully. She took a cloth and swabbed his perspiring forehead. Then she stood back against the wall, her dark eyes glistening, watching the faintly visible rise and fall of Limpy's chest.

Finally her eyes turned toward Joe King who was looking at her severely.

"You want me go?" she asked in her best English.

Joe didn't say anything.

"You want me go?" she repeated.

But Joe was only seeing Limpy, even though his stern look had fastened upon the girl. Inwardly he may have been disturbed by her presence. She was a runaway who didn't belong at the ranch.

Several times the Kings had ordered her off, but she had kept coming back.

Tonight, no one could quite remember how it was that she had come in and begun to help. Once the doctor had called for water, and she had come through the door with a half-filled pail before anyone else could answer the request. And before they knew it, Joe and Sarah were both giving her orders, and she was running errands for them, moving as silently as a slender, graceful shadow through the lamp-lighted room.

JOE's look now caused her to edge away toward the door. She closed it silently behind her. A few moments later Joe saw that she was standing outside at the window, looking in at Limpy. Her strong attractive face gave no expresseion.

The rain was dripping rhythmically from the eaves, and Joe saw the drops fall over her black braided hair and slither over her copper-colored shoulders. She seemed not to notice.

"Come in, Wanda," he said, motioning to her.

Her dark eyes flashed a look of gratefulness. She moved away from the window and a moment later tiptoed into the room.

"You can sit and watch him," Joe said, "while we get some coffee."

Sarah gave Joe a questioning look. The runaway Cherokee girl didn't belong here, and she was trying too hard, Sarah thought, to win the King's good graces. But Sarah preferred to agree with Joe, and she added, "You watch him, Wanda."

Under her breath Sarah, drinking coffee, mentioned to Joe that they had better both watch Wanda, to be sure she didn't steal anything she could get her hands on.

Wanda was a seventeen or eighteen year old Cherokee who had had some contact with white civilization by way of one of the Indian mission schools. Late in the summer she and her family had passed this way on their southward trek to Cherokee Indian lands. And Wanda had stopped for a drink of water.

That was how it had begun.

Joe remembered that she had bounded down from the rear of the open wagon and come trotting over, in spite of the scoldings from her mother. She was dressed more like a gypsy than an Indian, with gay ribbons ornamenting her black braids, and she wore a blue cambric dress adorned with a yellow sash at her slender waist.

A renegade, he had thought. He had pointed to the well and told her to help herself. Then, too late, he had looked back to see her mounting a horse that one of the hands had left at the hitching rack. She rode away into the hills as hard as she could go.

From the wagon, her family screamed at her, but her father kept right on driving south. As long as they were in sight, Joe could hear the mother wailing like a wounded animal. And that was how Wanda and her family parted.

A few days later the girl had returned to the Circle K and tied the horse to the hitching rack. In her best English she had asked the pardon of anyone at the ranch who would listen to her. She could not go on with her family to the Indian lands, she had explained. Could she please have a bite of food?

Sarah King had given her a handout, then, and ordered her to be on her way. But she had returned time and again, from that day to this, always trying to do a few favors in return for food.

And now, as Joe and Sarah King sat, waiting for the dawn that they believed would be Limpy McNeal's last, they listened to the low murmurings of the Indian girl who was working over him.

She was pressing a wet cloth to his lips, and perhaps she succeeded in getting him to drink a little water.

As they came back into the room, she said, "He drink. . . He will live."

CHAPTER IV

WEEKS later, Limpy McNeal declared that he was going to learn to walk, and no one was going to stop him.

"You're paralyzed in one leg, according to the doc," said Joe King. "An' your other foot's pretty stubborn. What d'ya aim to do, walk on your hands?"

"I aim to walk," said Limpy.

"I reckon you ain't fergot you're carryin' a slug of lead alongside your backbone."

"Yeah. I git reminded now and then," Limpy grinned. "Lucky you didn't let the doc jerk that hunk o' ore. When I start walkin' I'm gonna need it fer ballast."

Limpy used his arms to excellent advantage. He didn't mind if his solid chest grew a little thicker with muscles, though he was already well packed with sinews of strength and had always been considered, in spite of his crushed foot, the strongest all-around ranch hand on the Circle K.

He couldn't be downed in spirit. His muscles wanted a workout, and he found he could devote hours, during his recuperation, to roping excercises. And that numb leg of his, below the bullet-side of his backbone, was more than dead weight. He could drag it into place and bear weight upon it, and stand, with more or less dependable balance.

At times he would fall; and sometimes he would look up to see the Indian girl watching him from the kitchen window. But she would pretend she hadn't seen, and would go on, rolling the white dough in her brown hands, wasting only a sidewise glance on him.

He would drag himself, rope and all, to the nearest wall and gradually lift himself into an upright position.

Wanda brought him his meals. The Kings had made temporary quarters for him in the back room of their house. But he didn't intend to spend the winter there. As soon as he began to find the new arts of moving himself, with the aid of elbows and knees and steel fingers, he planned to resume his own ranch life.

The King brothers would come riding home after a day on the range, and would swing out of their saddles and stride across the yard. Then they would catch sight of him, bracing one knee against the ground, and struggling to reach a windowsill with his fingertips. One of the boys would come over toward him, and the pity that shone in his eyes was something Limpy couldn't stand.

"Get away, damn it. I'll bust my own bronchos. The next guy that tries to help me is gonna git hogtied and punched in the nose."

"I reckon you're all right. Jis' thought I'd give you a hand."

"I don't need a hand. Hell, I can whip any three of you with two legs tied behind me."

When the men had gone on in for supper, Limpy would look across the canyon to the patch of green that showed in the sunset. One corner of Limpy's Gulch, four or five miles away, was visible from his window. And that corner of green tugged at him like a bull calf on a rope. The frost hadn't hit yet. When it did, there'd still be half a winter's grazing for a small herd.

"I'm ready to go over any day now," he announced to Joe that evening.

HE LIFTED himself to the end of the bunk to make room for Joe to sit. Wanda brought in a plate of steaming food and moved the small table up to him.

"You've got a good place right here for the winter, Limpy," Joe said. "Ain't we feedin' you enough?"

"The best in the world," Limpy said, grinning. "But I need to git over to the shanty. There's lots I can do between now an' spring—"

"I go with him," said Wanda. "I care for him."

Neither man had noticed that she had paused in the doorway until she spoke. Limpy stared at her.

Joe raised his eyebrows, and said to Limpy, half mocking, "Shé *care* for you! What d'you think of that?"

"I go with him," Wanda repeated. Limpy saw the light dance in her eyes. She was begging for some word of approval.

In his recent weeks of tightening his grip on the life that had almost fled him, he had had the assistance of Wanda every day. She had been so loyal and so efficient that the women of the King ranch had praised her.

Joe King rose and brushed his fingers through his hair slowly.

"Wanda, why don't you go to your people?"

The girl might not have heard. She might not have seen Joe's challenging look that demanded an answer. He stood in her way, but she brushed past him quietly to stand before Limpy.

"You want me go away?"

"I didn't say so, did I?"

"You want me go?"

Limpy drew a deep painful breath. "I hear the government has made a place for you. You're supposed to be down there with the rest of your tribe."

"You like me help you?"

"Sure I like it," Limpy blurted. "What the hell?"

"Stop bothering him," Joe King said. "He's too sick to be talking nonsense. Get out."

It was late November when Joe and one of his cowboys drove Limpy across the canyon and up the sloping trail to Limpy's Gulch.

"I see you've got a reception waitin' for you," Joe remarked.

"She came over early this morning," Limpy said. "She said she wanted to get a fire started before I came."

"Did she walk across?" But Joe's question was answered by the friendly neigh of Limpy's Black mare, prancing up to the gate of the small corral which Limpy had built in the west curve of the gulch.

They deposited Limpy at the door. There the smell of coffee captured them, and they spent an hour around the table.

Wanda hardly spoke during that hour and Joe carefully avoided any conversation that might concern her. But when the meal was over and the girl brought a scarlet Indian blanket with a yellow circle in the center and wrapped it around Limpy's shoulders, Joe smiled at her.

"That blanket—where did you get that, Wanda?"

"Limpy need it," Wanda said.

LIMPY made a mild protest. He was pale from the ordeal of crossing the canyon, and Joe thought, the stubborn mule, he'd no business coming back here to live; he was looking sick, all right; he had plenty of grit, but he wouldn't last till spring. He was probably in more pain all the time than anyone guessed.

"Take it back, Joe. It belongs at the ranch house," Limpy said. "You shouldn't have brought it, Wanda."

"Limpy need it," Wanda repeated,

coming to Joe with deep imploring in her eyes. There was something haunting in her beauty. Her devotion to Limpy was something to watch, he thought. She tightened the robe around Limpy's chest.

"You're right, Limpy needs it," Joe said. "Keep it, Limpy."

"Till spring," said Limpy, "if you can spare it. I'll settle up a lot of debts this spring."

"None of that talk," Joe said, thumping him on the chest. "Give me a good cussin' before I go, so I know you're feelin' yourself."

"Wait till I've had a nap," Limpy said, his head drooping to his arm on the table. "Right this minute there ain't a good cuss left in me." Then he straightened. "But if you git wind of the damned fourflusher that ripped me up with lead, doubledamn me if I won't ride him down and blast his hide to shreds an' use him fer bed tickin'! . . . Thanks, boys, an' come often."

CHAPTER V

FOR the first time in the history of the canyon, a church bell rang out, clear and musical, one Sunday morning in January.

The residents up and down the valley heard it with the odd feeling that civilization was gradually creeping into their raw and untamed west. Some of them were pleased, some were put to shame by their long forgotten religious emotions, and some openly mocked.

To Limpy McNeal, battling through a physical crisis, the sound of the bells somehow stirred a nameless dread. The faint dong . . . dong . . . dong . . . persisted for a period of many minutes. He left the table, inched his way to the door, and moved slowly out into the yard in front of his shanty leaning heavily on a pair of homemade crutches.

"Here . . . Your coat . . . Your cap," Wanda said, taking care to wrap him as he moved along.

She stood in the doorway watching him. He plodded on to the corral gate, braced himself against it, and listened. It was a sunshiny morning. The snow was crusted under foot.

Dong . . . dong . . . dong . . .

The folks at Shattersville had been waiting for several weeks for the first ringing of the new bell, Limpy knew. From his side of the canyon he had watched the church steeple rise, during theses recent days of clear weather. It was seven miles away, across the canyon to the north. Through the clear winter air he had been able to see the little moving specks which he knew to be builders at work; and at last they had finished. From his corral gate it was the only point of Shattersville that he could see—a blunt white steeple pointing stiffly upward in front of the distant blue mountain.

"I wonder," he said to himself, "whether the devil that planted the bullet in my back is listenin' the same as I am . . ."

When the church service ended, that morning, the tall, sharp-faced minister sought out one of his congregation to whom he felt a special debt of gratitude. He extended his hand and the round little man with the concertina hanging from his shoulder shook with him awkwardly.

"It was very nice of you, Mr. Bannister, to come and make music for us on this occasion."

"Jis' call me Pard, Reverend. Everyone calls me Pard."

"All right, Pard. Anyway," Reverend Morrison patted him on the shoulder for good measure, "my sincere appreciation. Have you ever played in a church before?"

"Not that I recollect." Pard raised

an eyebrow as if on his guard. "I been in the west quite a spell."

"I understand. Well, Mr. Bannister—Pard—I hope we can be real partners as time goes on. Until the church is able to afford an organ, I'd be glad to have you accompany us as a regular thing, if you don't mind."

"I ain't never hired out to play fer money," Pard said, "but if you mean—oh, hell, hell, I reckon you didn't mean—excuse my language but what I mean to say is—"

"I think we understand each other perfectly," said Reverend Morrison, looking tall and gentle and forgiving. "Now I'm going to make a suggestion. If this good weather continues and the trails clear, how would you like to do a little circuit riding with me? There must be many ranches around where we could call and hold brief services, and I would be very happy to have you play a hymn or two at each service."

"You mean we'd ride over to the Circle K and places like that?" Bannister considered. "There'd be lots of free dinners in it, I reckon."

Reverend Morrison laughed lightly. "I'm sure we needn't worry about that end of it. Think it over, Pard—"

"I reckon we'd take a swing up around Shady Grove sooner or later. Yeah, sure. You can lead, Reverend. I'll follow suit."

THE faint sounds of crunching ice and snow, echoing through the hollows of the canyon, awakened Limpy one morning soon after daybreak. The steel shafts of a cold February sun shone through the two east windows. Someone was coming across the canyon, to pass this way within the next half hour. When everything was still, sounds carried up from the bottom of the canyon, and Limpy had learned to tell when approaching visitors began their ascent up along the zigzagging trail.

He started to call Wanda, but decided to wait. The thin cheesecloth partition still hung between the two rooms; for her bed was the buffalo robe which she would place at night near the kitchen stove.

From his bunk near the fireplace he could see the outlines of her youthful form through the screen of flimsy cloth. She had heated water and was bathing hastily and the curves of her body caught flashes of sunlight.

As she dressed, she went to the window to look down into the canyon. She had heard, too. There would be company soon.

A moment later she drew the cloth curtain back to the wall and came in to Limpy. She was a glowing, beautiful person, Limpy thought.

"Awake? I bring you water."

"Thanks, Wanda."

"Here. I help you with bath. Feel good this morning?"

"I feel fine."

"Look good. Your cheeks good color. I slap your cheeks. There. Good color, like an Indian. Your back—how? Like a board?"

"Like a fire," said Limpy. "And my bum leg's like a hunk of ice."

"You want me help you out of bed? No. You help yourself. Take your bath. Get dressed. Company coming."

"Who d'ya reckon it is?"

"I see two riders. One tall. One short. Lots of overcoats. Not the Kings. Someone else."

"All right, Wanda, we've still got plenty of coffee, and I guess you can still find a few slabs of bacon. They must be early risers."

"Stay all night at Circle K. Leave before breakfast."

"Well, whoever it is, they'll be our first breakfast guests. We'll treat 'em right. It's a sure cinch they'll like your cookin'."

CHAPTER VI

FROM the moment that Reverend Morrison and Pard Bannister arrived, Limpy sensed a mysterious tension in the atmosphere. He tried to ignore it. But it was there, at every turn.

Wanda must have sensed it too, he thought. From the moment that the preacher had turned to her and said, "And you are Mrs. McNeal, I presume," Wanda had frozen up like clam. You'd have thought she couldn't speak more than two or three words of English, the way she acted.

"No, she isn't my wife, Reverend," Limpy said bluntly, as if it wasn't a fact that had to be swept down a rathole like the dirt off the floor. "She's a damn' good friend—beggin' your pardon. Ever since that night I got shot in the back, she's took care of me. Otherwise I reckon I wouldn't be alive. I ain't figured out yet how a man can pay back a lot of kindnesses that come his way when he's laid up. I reckon you know, Reverend, that there's a lot of unpaid goodness in the world."

Reverend Morrison nodded without answering, and seemed to be looking through him. He felt embarrassed over the moment of strained silence, as if he had said something injurious to himself or to Wanda. He turned his talk to Pard Bannister, who was sitting on the rug by the fireplace, his fat face bunched together in his fingers.

"Pard, I ain't seen you since that night it happened. You was the last one I talked to before that slug got me."

"Yeah, I remember."

"It all happened too fast fer me to warn you. I guess he passed you on the way out."

"Yeah. Shot over my head 'bout six times. An' I gave 'em all back as fast as they came. I still can't figure how I missed him."

"What I can't figure is how he spotted me so quick in the dark. Musta heard my voice, I reckon. Prob'ly someone who knew me. But that lightnin' came just right to accommodate him. I reckon the Lord was on his side, all right. Pardon me, Reverend. I didn't mean no offense."

"I guess you got a good look at him by that lightnin'," said Bannister.

"Not much. Hardly any."

"You'd prob'ly know him if you saw him again."

"What d'ya mean, I'd know him? Can you git one quick wink of a man in the lightnin' and know him on sight? Hell, the only way you'd know him again is, he shoots you in the back."

Silence fell over the conversation, for Limpy realized his voice had edged with excitement that the minister didn't appreciate.

"It is unfortunate," Reverend Morrison said slowly. "Are you still quite unable to walk? I notice that you haven't moved from the chair since we came in."

"I'm gittin' along fine, thanks," Limpy said.

"Do I understand that you were returning home through a storm when you were attacked?"

"That's right," said Limpy. "We'd stopped in at the Red Boot for a little celebration on our way back from Abilene—"

"Drinking?" the minister asked. And when Limpy swallowed hard, not certain what he was expected to answer, the minister nodded again, as if no further answer was necessary. He sent a faint smile to the kitchen as he asked Wanda if she wouldn't like to come in and join them for a brief service.

The Indian girl continued to gather

up the dishes as if she hadn't heard. But when Limpy made a little motion to her, she came in and sat quietly by the fireplace; and her eyes looked steadily at the coals while the minister read a scripture and Bannister played a hymn.

Before they left, Reverend Morrison turned to Wanda.

"They told me about you at the Circle K. They tell me your parents are down in the Cherokee lands. Wouldn't you like for me to write them a letter and tell them about you?"

"I can write," Wanda said. "I learn at the mission."

"Then why don't you write to them? Let them know what it is you're doing."

"They do not read."

REVEREND MORRISON looked to Limpy and drew a slow breath. "Mr. McNeal, I wish to help the morals of this valley in any way I can. It is only right that all of us refrain from every appearance of evil."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I want to make this community better—more decent—more righteous."

Limpy gave a low hum. "If that means you want to stop some of the shootin' and robbin' you got a chance to make yourself awful popular. With me. An' a lot of others."

The minister's sharp face tightened. "There are other things to be talked about, Mr. McNeal. But you're a sick man, and I'm sure we're not ready to talk together this morning. However, think it over what I've said. And if you don't mind, I'll call again this spring."

Limpy turned to the Indian girl. "Wanda, do you want to ask the minister to come back again this spring?"

Wanda looked very straight at Reverend Morrison and said quietly, "You come back."

CHAPTER VII

IT WAS April, and Mort Landers stood at his window, looking down the long winding trail. Blue shadows slipped lazily over the canyon landscape as soft spring clouds scudded along. Under the noon sun the two riders could be seen approaching a fork in the trail. It had been many weeks since anyone had taken the right fork that led up to his solitary lodge.

The two riders bore to the right.

Landers took the Sharpes' rifle from the shelf and brushed the sights. Then he waited, watching, until the approaching pair came into sight again around the curve of the mountain.

Landers' lips spread into a sour smile and he lowered his gun. One of the raiders was a short, pudgy fellow who carried a dark object on his side which Landers guessed to be a musical instrument. The other man must be the new minister, Landers thought. He had heard of this circuit riding team in recent weeks, and he knew that sooner or later Pard Bannister would find his way to the upper canyon.

Landers replaced his gun on the shelf above the table. He glanced at himself in the mirror and decided to comb his dark matted hair, as a special concession to visitors. After a long winter of solitude, he was about to have company.

An hour later, the two riders were on their way back down the canyon.

Reverend Morrison was in high spirits.

"There's a lonely man," he said to his musician. "I believe those few words we had together made a deep impression. Anyway I trust that our effort hasn't been wasted."

"I reckon it ain't," said Pard Bannister.

"I often feel that it is a man's own reflections, which come to him after

I've gone, that do him the most good."

"Yeah. I'd give a lot to know what Landers is thinkin' right now . . . Hey!"

"Something wrong?"

"That was durn careless of me," Bannister said, reaching from one pocket to another. "My gloves. I left 'em back there. I'll hafta ride back. It's only half a mile."

"Very well, I'll ride on. If you don't catch me, I'll wait for you at Shady Grove."

A few minutes later Bannister settled himself at the table while Landers filled two glasses.

"I can't stay long," Bannister said. "That gospel shooter keeps a stout lasso on me. But we got time for a private word or two, and I figure you outa be ready to talk your plans."

"Who says I got any plans?" Landers said belligerently. "I don't like this—you comin' back this way. You'll throw suspicion on me. Maybe that preacher's sharper than you think."

"He might smell liquor on me, but it won't go no deeper'n that. Well?"

"Well?"

"It's soon gonna be good travelin' weather."

'Who's travelin'?"

"I figure you are. You'll be headin' for Texas or California within a month. An' before you go there's a little matter of six thousand dollars that's itchin' to be divided."

"Sure," said Landers casually. "I've got it in mind."

"Well, I'm here and I'm in the market."

'Look," Landers said, pointing down the valley. "From this window I been keepin' watch on a little speck in the snow thirty-five or forty-mile down the way. It's right across the canyon from King's Cirle K. When the snow's right and the sun's right, I can sometimes see a little activity down there. Smoke twistin' up. Stock tramplin' a black path through the snow. There's someone livin' down there."

"Yeah."

"He's still alive, ain't he?"

"Yeah."

"That's bad. It ain't safe."

PARD BANNISTER flared with anger. "Hell, you had no business shootin' him. You promised me when we went into the deal—"

"I never promised you nothin'. I told you I was no amateur, an' that's how it was then, an' that's how it is now. You think I leave 'em alive so they can pop up an' point at me? I like to be comfortable."

"You could have paid me off and beat it to California."

"I don't like to be hurried. When I go, I want to know he ain't trailin' me. Listen. I've seen a lot of this an' I've learned somethin' worth knowin'. A sheriff can search for you for six months and then ferget about you in favor of someone else. But the man you almost kill, *he* don't forget about you fer a minute the rest of his life. From then on, you're both livin' with unfinished business on your hands until one or the other of you cleans the slate."

Landers poured another drink for Bannister, then took his own from the bottle. He emptied it into the box in the corner. Then he sat where he could gaze down the canyon. For several minutes neither man spoke.

Finally Landers said, with a sour chuckle, "Hell, you never coulda told me he'd live through till spring. They had him dyin' all day the next day."

"An Indian gal said some kind of magic words over him," said Bannister. He picked up his gloves and slipped them in his pocket.

"She's livin' with him now?"

"She's there, if that's what you mean."

"I may go down for a visit."

"No. Leave 'em alone. Why don't you square up and get out before you get yourself tangled up."

"I told you why. I don't aim to leave no unfinished business."

"They're peaceful," said Bannister. "They oughtn't to be troubled."

"You play your damn' concertina too much. It takes all the red outa your blood."

"They'll never make trouble for no one. No one but the preacher. He's got a silly notion to worry because they ain't married. You square up an' we'll call the deal closed."

"We'll close the deal the night I finish the job. Or maybe you'd like to finish it for me."

Bannister rose. "I'd better go. The preacher'll worry you've unconverted me." He paused in the doorway. "How 'bout my share, Landers?"

Landers' fingers tapped nervously at the pistol that hung at his side. "I told you I was no amateur. I'll knock at your door the night I finish the job. In the meantime, go right on playin' your concertina, nice and religious."

"Yeah. Don't fergit, I can play other instruments too."

Then he stepped down the path, drawing his overcoat tight around him, and mounted and rode down the trail.

CHAPTER VIII

THREE herds crossed the canyon early that spring to feed on the south range. The Kings managed to "lose" a few unbranded calves near the top of the canyon on Limpy's side.

"Hey, you're lettin' 'em git away from you, boss," a green hand yelled at Joe King as they neared the lip of the canyon. "There's no profit in that."

"Leavin' 'em on purpose," Joe said, riding up to him. "We'll all do it this spring. The Lazy V's an' the Bar H's already let a few head slip through their fingers. Accidental like."

"I don't get it."

"Fer Limpy. He's the cripple over there in the gulch. Hobblin' from an old accident, an' now he's wearin' crutches from a bullet last fall."

"Gollies, he's played in hard luck, sounds like."

"Limpy's a good man an' he's a damn good neighbor. As long as he lives we'll give him an extry break. Nobody figured he'd hold on this long with a hunk o' lead crowdin' his backbone. But the way he's snail-pacin' around these days, looks like he's gonna pull through."

They passed within half a mile of the shanty in Limpy's Gulch, and they could see Limpy down by the corral. He was waving and pointing with some sort of crutch, trying to tell them that they had left some dogies.

"He looks as wobbly as a colt on his first legs," the hand commented.

"You'd be surprised how his arms work," Joe said. "An' what he can do with a rope you wouldn't believe. He's fixed up a windlass so's he can set on the edge of the canyon an' lift a load of wood from lower down which someone has gathered up fer him."

"Or a runaway calf?"

"I reckon he'd manage to lift a bull if we'd leave one."

That afternoon and evening Limpy worked like a beaver to "rescue" the three calves that the Kings had lost in the canyon. Wanda was down there, doing her best to round them up and drive them into the pocket of the canyon wall immediately below Limpy's windlass station. This was their elevator system. The long rope had hauled many a load of wood up this vertical wall, to save Wanda an hour of toil on the treacherous canyon path.

It was a moment of triumph when one of the calves would run into the pocket. The loop of rope was waiting, and Limpy would bide his time until he could catch a hitch on the hind legs. Looking down from more than a hundred feet overhead, he would direct Wanda as she completed the hitch on all four feet. With great care he would haul away, operating the winch with one hand and guiding the rope with the other.

By the following afternoon they had succeeded in landing the three lost calves, adding them to his own small herd. Wanda unsaddled the black mare, turned her into the corral, and walked over to Limpy smiling.

Limpy gave a little wave with his crutch as she approached. Those three calves were a victory hard won. Limpy liked the look of triumph in Wanda's smile. As if they'd pulled down a blue ribbon together in a rodeo event.

He was hobbling almost without the help of his crutch, now that he had an arm over her shoulder. She made some joke about deciding not to make him a wooden leg after all, but to save the log for firewood. She laughed, tossing her head, and her flowing hair brushed his wrist.

IT WAS true, the paralyzed leg was regaining its sensitivity slowly. It was behaving for him, and he wondered whether, some of these days, he might not try mounting his horse again.

The clack of hoofs sounded from the elevation beyond the shanty. Limpy looked up to see Reverend Morrison and Pard Bannister riding up. He allowed his arm to slip away from Wanda's shoulder.

"Go make a meal, Wanda," he said. "We've got company."

Then Limpy waved to the riders and they came up in a manner of practiced cordiality, shook Limpy's hand, dismounted, and walked with Limpy into the shanty.

"We won't stay long," Reverend Morrison said. "No, I'm afraid it's too early for supper, so—"

Bannister interrupted to remind the minister that it was a hard ride back to Shattersville; but Reverend Morrison was adamant. They would hold a brief service, with Limpy's permission, and be on their way.

Limpy sat on the edge of the bunk. The exhausting work over the edge of the canyon had left him weak. He should have had a cup of coffee before trying to listen to the minister's rumbling voice. His fingers were trembling and he felt light-headed. He hardly knew what was being read.

It was thoughtful of Wanda, Limpy thought, to have brought the minister a chair and placed the oil lamp for him. She sat on the buffalo robe by the fire, and her face was pretty and flushed. The minister was watching her critically out of the corner of his eye, Limpy thought.

Pard Bannister was watching her too; but his eyes were everywhere, taking in every corner of the room. Pard wasn't listening, that was a cinch.

"Let me repeat," the minister said, clearing his throat and enunciating with care, " 'Thou shalt not steal.' "

Then he stopped and looked accusingly at Limpy and said:

"The words are plain. Whether it's gold or silver, or whether it's lost calves from another man's herd, the command is clear."

Limpy gave a start. "Huh?"

"Is there anything you'd like to say at this point, Mr. McNeal?"

"I don't reckon I ever stole anything in my life. Anybody can tell you that." Limpy swallowed hard. "You sure can't be referrin' to the unbranded strays they leave me in the canyon. Cause if you are, why, hell—I beg your pardon—"

"I'm only reading you the word as it's written."

Limpy jutted his jaw. "Don't you reckon *I know* the game the boys is playin' on me, makin' believe they're losin' their stock accidentally? They're doin' me favors, quiet like, an' I'm acceptin', quiet like; but not for keeps. When I git back on my feet, I'm payin' it all back, see? I'm keepin' a list—"

Limpy broke off. The excitement had leaped into his voice and he saw that the minister was playing an advantage, just sitting there, gazing at him in a way to make him defend himself.

Limpy lowered his voice. "Ain't there somethin' in the good book about rescuin' a lamb that would otherwise be lost?"

The minister switched to a more dreaded accusation without batting an eyelash.

"The people of my church are wondering, Mr. McNeal, whether you aren't making it your business to rescue too many lost lambs." He turned his gaze upon Wanda, so that Limpy couldn't miss his allusion.

"Are you talkin' about lambs, er cows, er somethin' else?" Limpy asked.

"I'm referring to something else, Mr. McNeal. My church across the canyon stands as a pillar of righteousness, and every iniquity shall sooner or later fall before it."

THE fighting blood leaped through Limpy, and his fists doubled, and his jaw tightened. But his body held rigid, and he sat there. Thank goodness, Wanda didn't know the meaning of all the minister's big words. The minister hadn't come right out and said, "Send that Indian girl away."

After another hymn from Bannister, the circuit riders mounted. Limpy scarcely heard their departing words. Now he was watching Bannister. Bannister had puzzled him. Bannister had been so distant, yet so wistful, so quietly observing. At no time since the night of the shooting had Bannister repeated his cordiality of that night.

"Don't take that shortcut!" Limpy shouted after them. "That path is too soft. Take the next one over."

For a moment he had a mental image of the pair of them falling with their horses over a bit of trail that the melted snows had softened, and rolling down over the perpendicular wall. But the riders went on to a safer path and rode over the edge and out of sight.

"I reckon I shouldn't be too concerned," Limpy thought angrily. "What I said about lost sheep didn't seem to make no impression."

Wanda went about her evening's work in silence. She avoided Limpy's eyes as she set the table; and while he ate, she found some reason to take care of the chores then rather than to eat with him. She had understood, all right. That white steeple across the canyon was a sharp pointed wedge that would pierce through the peace and harmony of Limpy's Gulch. It would force its way through his shanty and and drive her out into the cold. She was an Indian, and she didn't belong here. She wasn't anybody's wife. Staying here to help Limpy was a sin. An "iniquity," the preacher had called it.

Limpy couldn't sleep that night. The details of the day kept riding over his mind, cutting deep ruts.

When at last a drowsy, dreamy state engulfed him, he was suddenly awakened by the rustle of the curtain. Wanda was tiptoeing in. She touched his cheek.

"Limpy. Limpy. Someone coming."

"Who?"

"Not know who. One rider. Against the moon. I saw."

CHAPTER IX

LIMPY dressed as hastily as he could. Wanda returned from the window. She handed him his pistol. She followed him as he moved, with the aid of his clumsy crutch, to the door. Together they listened. It was a still, cold, moonlit April night.

"Did he take soft path?" Wanda asked.

"I don't know. Where was he when you saw him? . . . Against the moon, huh? Maybe he did, at that."

Minutes later they lowered a torch over the perpendicular wall. They could see a riderless horse down there among the rocks, kicking and twitching from a fatal fall. The beast was dying. The rider must be down there too, somewhere, Limpy thought. He swung the torch back and forth from the rope, watching the dim light leap over the rocks more than a hundred feet below.

"I go down," Wanda said.

"Not yet," said Limpy. "Get another torch . . . Wait! Come back. Here he is!"

The rider was hanging among the crags within twenty-five feet of the top, a dark heap with a bleeding arm showing out of the torn sleeve of his coat. He'd had to scramble fast, Limpy guessed, to avoid the fall to his death. At Limpy's call, he responded with a faint moan.

"Take it easy, stranger. We'll git ya up if you'll hang on. Damned if I know what the hell you're looking fer around here this time o' night. What's your name?"

The stunned man answered with another groan.

"I can't get down there to you, pardner, but if you can slip this rope under your shoulders, I can hoist you up."

Toward dawn, Limpy and Wanda and the stranger faced each other across the table in Limpy's shanty. Limpy apologized for having shot the horse. "Had to put the poor critter out of his misery. He was busted up bad, you could tell. But hell, you got off lucky. Nothin' seriously wrong with you, now that we got that arm bandaged. How ya feelin'?"

"Sick." The stranger shifted his arm. He stared at the fire whose light etched the deep comma-shaped lines in his hard cheeks. His fingers passed over his matted hair.

"Headache?"

"Roarin'."

"You musta took some healthy bumps on the way down, though they don't show." Limpy offered him a drink. "Try some o' this an' maybe you'll clear up. Was you on your way to Kings? . . . Huh? . . . Don't you remember nothin' yet?"

"Can't remember a thing."

"You oughta at least remember your name. . . . Don't worry. It'll come to you directly. You ain't come from too far off, I reckon, judgin' by how light you're travelin'. I seem to have seen you somewhere before. I reckon the King'll know you. You've heard of the King boys. Huh? Circle K?"

The stranger closed his eyes and shook his head slowly. "Can't seem to remember—"

"Then I'll tell you what we'll do," said Limpy. "We'll take a look through your pockets. You'll have some kind o' papers with your name on, sure."

LIMPY reached toward one of the fellow's pockets, but the man made a fuss of shuffling his arms uncomfortably. Just let him rest, that was all he wanted for the present. But Limpy wasn't to be put off so easily, and when he persisted, the man began to regain his faculties quite suddenly, it appeared. He mumbled that his memory was coming back a little.

"What's your name, then?" Limpy was growing more suspicious.

"Landers . . . Mort Landers."

"Where do ya live?"

"Off that way. Yeah, up the canyon."

"Shady Grove?"

" 'Tother side."

"What was ya doin' down this way? Got any business? Huh? Speak up. Looks like you're prowlin'." Limpy put the questions fast, on the alert for every symptom of a dodge. "This is perty late at night to be goin' nowhere. What's yer business, Mort Landers?"

"It's all kinda hazy."

"Too damn' hazy. Here. The girl's got some food for you. But first, let's clear up this fog. What'd you come for?"

"Seems like I was lookin' fer a preacher, and I seen him come this way."

Limpy gave a low, uncertain growl. Maybe he was getting somewhere and maybe he wasn't. He persisted with his questions as the man munched the warmed-up leftovers from supper.

Landers finally declared that he must have gone to sleep on his horse, and didn't wake up until he was falling.

"Did he have gun?" Wanda asked. The stranger looked sourly at her, but Limpy repeated the question, crowding him for some kind of answer. He was wearing a holster.

"I reckon it slipped out when I fell."

"Outa yer hand?" Limpy asked sharply.

"Yeah . . . No, I mean outa the holster . . . It's down by the hoss, I reckon."

He put on a fairly convincing show of being stunned and sick, and Limpy decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

For three days Limpy and Wanda took care of him, fed him, and allowed him to sleep by the fire. Wanda watched him like a hawk.

She whispered to Limpy. "He should go. He eat too much."

"I don't know," Limpy would say. "I reckon he ain't well enough to walk across the canyon, and I ain't in the mood to lend him a horse. But he better git well an' git movin'. Er else start makin' himself useful."

"He watch you. He look for something. He sit by fire and watch you, watch me, all time."

"Hell, maybe the preacher sent him over to spy on us. He'll be makin' up stories to take back to town."

"Why?" Wanda's voice betrayed her rising fears. "They want to send me to my people?"

BUT a deeper suspicion inflamed Limpy's mind. He began to put two and two together and it didn't add up to four. It added up to six thousand dollars.

A green hand from the Circle K came over late one afternoon to bring Limpy some supplies. The King brothers had finished building a foundation for an extension of their ranchhouse, and they had a little cement left over which they thought Limpy could use.

Limpy tried to pay for it; the hand said nothing doing. He deposited the sacks in Limpy's shed and rode off.

Limpy hobbled back to the house wondering how he would use the cement. He had known the gift was coming, and had hoped there would be enough to make a front step and fill some of the chinks around his rock foundation.

Well, he'd put it to good use, all right. And this would be another thing to pay back to Joe King in another year.

It was a good sign, he thought, that Joe should send it over. As if Joe had said to himself, "Limpy has dodged the Grim Reaper; he's going to live out his days; he may as well go on building up his ranch."

As Limpy drew himself in through the door good arms aiding poor legs, he had a flash of inspiration. If this mysterious Landers was still too weak to hike across the canyon, Limpy would build him up with a little hard work. Let him help mix cement, and see how he liked it.

If the cowboy from the Circle K hadn't been traveling on, on another errand, Limpy would have sent the stranger back with him. But Landers was still here, behaving like a star boarder. Limpy would put him to work, and by George they'd make that porch step tomorrow.

This was in Limpy's mind as he crippled in toward the fireplace. But something ominous in the atmosphere made him change his mind. It was partly Wanda's strained silence. The presence of the man troubled her, so that she was quietly infuriated every time she looked his way.

Landers pretended to be half asleep. Limpy saw him look through the slits of his eyes, then nod, as if slipping back into his comfortable dreams. But when Limpy edged across to the bit of mirror on the shelf he saw that Landers was watching him closely. Landers probably knew that two feed sacks of cement had just arrived.

"Sleepin'?" Limpy asked.

"Thinkin' about that pheasant dinner we mighta had," said Landers lazily, giving a deep sigh as if waking. "If I'd had a gun this afternoon, we coulda feasted tonight. A couple pheasants came up within thirty feet."

"You mighta put salt on their tails," Limpy said. "Anyway, we don't lack for food, such as it is."

"If I'd had a gun, they'da been in the pan. But you an' the girl was both out, an' I couldn't find no firearms around. You must keep your rifle in the shed, huh?"

Landers mumbled something about Landers losing his pistol the night he fell, and why didn't he go down and look for it? "Wanda brought up your saddle, but she didn't find any pistol."

"Or else she lied about it," Landers said in an undertone. "Don't ever trust a squaw."

Limpy's temper flared, under the surface, and he wanted to swing a fist; but he held tight.

Later, after they had finished eating, and Wanda had built the fire up, Limpy began to talk. Slowly he unfolded an idea to see how his guest would take it.

"The Kings sent me over a couple feed sacks o' cement. Darn Joe anyhow, always givin' me somethin'. It's a wonder it didn't sift out all over the gullies, carried in feed sacks. But it got here." Limpy gave a little laugh. "Funny thing. It musta come in answer to my dream."

"What'd ya dream?"

"I dreamed all about what I'd make if I had a pa'cel of cement. I been dreamin' it over and over, several nights, so I got it all figured out how I'll make it."

"Whatcha gonna make?"

"A coffin," Limpy said.

CHAPTER X

LANDERS gave a low snort. "Whoever heard of a coffin made outa cement?"

"It's been done," Limpy said. "I read about it somewheres. An' that's what I want to fix outa this batch. You ever work in cement, Landers? You can help me."

Landers' face tightened and he started at Limpy, and the flesh under his dark eyes looked strained. "Did you say coffin?"

"Coffin. A box for a dead man."

"What the devil do you want with a coffin?"

"I may have a corpse on my hands, an' I don't want to leave him lyin' around. I want to take care of him right . . . What's the matter, Landers, is the fire gettin' too hot? Wanda, you shouldn'ta put that extry wood on. How 'bout openin' a window? There. That'll be more comfortable. No use to throw wood on the fire when you're already perspirin'."

"I'm not complainin'," said Landers. "Go on with your corpse."

"Oh, sure. Well, it's like this. You see I'm perty badly crippled. I don't recollect that you've ever asked me, since you come in to partake of my hospitality, so to speak, how it was that I earned this paralyzed leg. You musta wondered about it, more er less. Too polite to ask, I reckon. But I'll tell you about it."

Across the room Wanda was watching through the mirror while weaving.

Landers said, "Sure. I heard about it. You're the fella that got plugged one stormy night last fall. I don't recollect whether they ever run down the bandit."

"They say he got off toward Santa Fe before they could round him up. Me, I wasn't in no shape to run him down at the time. They say I was hangin' by a thread, an' it was a slim thread."

Landers nodded. "That's how I felt the other night when you first hoisted me up. Though I'm about well enough to ride, now, any time you can lend me a hoss."

"To go on with my story," said Limpy, "they tell me the culprit is likely a thousand miles away by now, an' I'll never see him again."

"You won't, I reckon," Landers said.

"On the contrary, I likely will."

"How? Where?"

"Well, it could happen. He might stray back this way some day."

"Didn't he leave you fer dead?"

"Sooner or later he'll hear that I'm still alive. When he does, it'll start eatin' on him. He'll worry that I might track him down, an' it'll gnaw at him till he thinks of it every night an' won't sleep from it."

"Yeah? I've heard of such things. Weaklin's, mostly."

"It'll happen," Limpy said. "When it eats deep enough, he'll git up on his hind legs some days—er night—an' he'll find his way here to my shanty, just to pay me his personal compliments."

"You really have been havin' dreams, aintcha?" Landers turned to Wanda, absorbed in her weaving. "How 'bout puttin' that red blanket around me, Cherokee? Oh, all right, the quilt'll do." He made a sour face and muttered that the girl would never let him use that red and yellow blanket, as if he were poison or something.

Limpy repeated sullenly, tapping the table at Landers' elbow. "He'll come back someday intendin' to kill me."

A dull silence. Landers cleared his throat and started a new topic, but Limpy wouldn't be put off.

"An' when he comes," Limpy said, staring at the fire, 'I'll be ready fer him."

Landers decided to agree, and he nodded with an exaggerated cocksureness in his eyes.

"Yeah. Yeah, you'll be ready. But how d'ya figure you'll know him? Can you identify him on sight?"

"No, I wouldn't say that. Fact is, I'll be at a disadvantage. But I don't figure he'll walk in shootin'. This canyon's full o' little sounds, an' I ain't easily took by surprise when visitors come around. If he hangs around, he'll damn sure reveal himself."

"How?"

"In little ways."

LANDERS rose and went to the shelf to pour himself a drink without being asked. He brought the bottle back with him, and placed an extra glass on the table. His hand was painfully steady. He settled back in his chair and drew the quilt around his shoulders.

"You know, Limpy," he said in the manner of an old friend, "I heard about your shootin' and I studied on it, and you know, Limpy, I always figure there mighta been a couple bandits in on that deal. Maybe more. You don't reckon the King brothers themselves mighta had a hand in it?"

"Are you bein' funny?"

"Hell, it pays to suspect everyone, even your best friends."

Limpy shook his head. "I won't waste my time suspectin'. I'll wait. He'll barge in some day, an' the first false move he makes, I'll kill him."

"Shoot him? Or stab him?" Landers' tone indicated that he was making light of Limpy's boast.

Limpy left the question in the air. He poured himself a drink. Then he became preoccupied with a piece of foolscap paper and a pencil. He sketched a picture. Landers began to show an interest from the corner of his eye, and presently Limpy showed it to him. It was a picture of a long narrow box.

"It's the coffin' we're goina build. We'll go to work on it right after chores in the mornin'."

"I don't get your idea, buildin' a cement coffin."

"Wood an' cement an' glass. I've got a glass transom that I brung home after one of my neighbors had a burnout. It'll work in perfect. Folk's'll be able to look in an' see the corpse without smellin'."

"Huh?"

"I figure the guy that shot me in the back will smell perty strong. Especially by the time I ride him around to Shattersville an' Shady Grove an' Red Boot to give everybody a look. After I've made the rounds the sheriff can have him. Or we might slide him in the river an' let him float down the canyon. Reckon we can make a cement coffin that'll float?"

"Yer talkin' to hear yourself rattle, pardner."

Limpy edged his words with flint. "Maybe you don't feel like I do about bandits that shoot a man in the back. I'm still sorta mad about it. You never thought of that, didja?"

"Hell, I can understand how you feel. Sure. I understand—"

"Every step I took while I was out there liftin' you outa the canyon was like walkin' through fire because o' what that night-ridin' devil did to me. You don't get it outa yer mind easy when the bullet's still there, proddin' ya every time you move." Limpy drew a deep breath. Then he lowered his voice to keep the excitement down. "About that coffin. Ya reckon we can make it float?"

"How you gonna knew whether it'll float?"

"I got that all figgered out. We can drag it over to my pond at the edge of the corral an' try it out. By George, we'll make it so's everyone from here to the ocean can git a look."

Landers gave a grunt of disgust.

"What'd ya say?" Limpy snapped at him.

"Floatin' it in the pond's no test. Not if you float it empty."

"Then one of us'll have to git in it to try. You kin do it, since I don't git up an' down easy."

"Yeah?" Landers poured himself another drink, and his hand wasn't too steady.

"Another thing," Limpy said. We'll put an inscription on it—something about 'He *used* to shoot men in the back.' Huh?"

LANDERS bumped his glass over. Limpy's hand darted for his pistol, but it was an unnecessary gesture, for Landers' spill had been an accident and a blunder, and he was chagrined over it. Limpy fumbled at his belt awkwardly, then changed his motion to a reach for his handkerchief, which he handed to Landers to catch the spilled drink. Landers didn't see him, but came to his feet, shaking the quilt out of the way. "Damned careless of me," Landers said.

Wanda came to the rescue and cleaned up the mess.

By the time she was finished Limpy managed to be again absorbed in his sketch. He didn't resume the conversation, except to mention that he had a piece of screen and Landers would be able to go to work sieving sand the first thing in the morning.

"Then I better git to bed an' git some rest," Landers said gloomily.

Wanda drew the curtain, and presently Landers bedded down for the night.

But Limpy sat for a long time, looking at the red coals, and massaging the icy nerves of his leg that were slowly coming back. He had asked the Circle K cowhand who brought the cement to be sure to tell Joe King about his visitor; and he hoped there would be a chance soon for Joe to send a horse over. Now he wondered: if Joe King came over tomorrow with an extra horse, would Landers mount and ride back across the canyon and go on his way?

"If Landers ain't the man who did it," Limpy said to himself, "what I recited to him about the coffin ought to make him so uncomfortable, he'll walk off on his own two legs first thing tomorrow mornin'."

Then Limpy tried the other side of his "if" and all he could see was blackness without any answers.

"If he *is* the man, an' he sure as hell acts like it, then he's here to finish the job. An' if I don't beat him to the punch, he'll dump me into the canyon an' ride off fer the other end o' the world. That's likely his plan . . . I wonder what he aims to do about Wanda if he has good luck with me . . . Hmm . . . My wallet could be nuggin' his chest this minute."

Limpy felt his fury rising again, like a prairie fire that couldn't be kept back over the horizon.

"If I can once catch him in some act that's a dead giveaway, damn me if I won't hogtie him and drag him acrost the canyon all the way back to Red Boot Inn . . . But what I can't remem fer sure—was he there that night? I oughta ask Pard Bannister next time he comes. He was playin' up an' down the room. He ought to know."

The coals were growing dim. He glanced toward the adjoining room. Through the curtain, he could see that Wanda's light was still burning dimly. She was still stirring around about something.

"Now what's she up to?" he asked himself. "She sure ain't been actin' her natural self this evening. Too much company, prob'ly. It's workin' on her . . . Wish he'd commence snorin' so's I could chance a wink o' sleep. But it's ten to one he's layin' there wide awake, waitin' fer me to start snorin'. Yeah, that's it . . . Hmm . . . Maybe I oughta accommodate him . . ."

CHAPTER XI

AFTER their visit with Limpy a few days before, the minister and Pard had taken a long trek to the south.

They had returned late this afternoon, making a brief stop at the Circle K. They were watering their horses when Joe King's cowhand, returning from a round of errands, rode into the yard.

Pard Bannister picked up his ears. The cowhand was saying something about having stopped at Limpy's to deliver some cement, and he gave Joe King some other bits of news about Limpy.

"They got someone stayin' with 'em," Bannister heard him say.

"Who?" Joe King asked.

"He didn't say. Some guy whose horse went over the edge and killed itself. The fellow caught on some rocks. He's been sittin' by the fire the last three or four days, Limpy says, an' the Indian gal is feedin' him."

"She's runnin' a regular hospital, sounds like. She oughta hang out her shingle."

"But Limpy said the fellow's ready to ride across if we can come over with an extry hoss tomorrow or sometime soon. I woulda bring him on back with me if I hadn't been going on around."

Bannister had frozen in his tracks, listening to them talk. Reverend Morrison called to him from the well and asked him if he didn't want a drink before they started on. Bannister caught himself answering, "Drink o' what?" Then he recovered himself and sauntered over to the well. But inwardly he was full of galloping chills of excitement.

All through these recent hours since their last visit to Limpy's Gulch, Bannister had been inwardly tortured. He could hardly think of anything else but what was going to happen to Limpy.

Along the trail, during the last few days, he had played such doleful and disturbed melodies that the minister had worried about him. From time to time it was, "There's something on your mind, my friend." Or, "Pard, you're troubled. I don't know what it is, but I'd advise that you take an honest look at your conscience."

And once he had said "I've a hunch, Bannister, that you're carrying a tragedy. If you've done something wrong, believe me, it's best to clear it up at once, no matter how painful it may be."

Bannister had been wavering between two fires, consequently.

Since his old dark days at Kansas City, he'd gone straight—until this man Landers had busted in on his life. That easy money had looked so bright and tempting. But Pard Bannister hadn't meant to pay any such price as Landers contracted for when he shot Limpy in the back.

THE torment was too much. It rode like an invisible devil in Bannister's saddle. Landers was still tugging at him; but Reverend Morrison—not a bad guy when you got to know him, and shared flapjacks and bacon with him over the campfire—was winning, little by little.

The murder that hung over the canyon would be on Pard's head. There was no escaping that fact.

Now he heard Joe King say, "If Limpy wants a horse, we'll take him a horse. Tomorrow, if we can get around to it."

That visitor was Landers. No doubt in the world about that. Landers had said he would call on Limpy when the snow cleared. So he was there, and for a purpose. But it hadn't happened yet. At least not according to the report of the cowhand.

"Let's be on our way, Pard," Reverend Morrison called. He had already mounted and was riding down the lane to the trail.

Bannister swung into his saddle. It was the voice of his master telling him to come on. He was leading easy these days, he thought. Maybe too easy.

Half a mile from the Circle K ranch house Bannister stopped.

"I'm goin' back, Reverend."

"Where you going?"

"Back. On business."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"You've already done it, I reckon—I mean—no, never mind." He whirled about and rode like a man who knew where he was going.

That was what Reverend Morrison thought, at any rate, as he watched. An odd looking spectacle, the minister always commented to himself when he watched Bannister from a distance. The farther away he was, the rounder he looked. And the black round blotch at his side, which at close range became a concertina, appeared at greater distance to be a smaller edition of Bannister himself. A large keg and a small one bouncing along together.

Reverend Morrison ambled on back to town.

At home, he bathed, ate, and read his Bible by the fireside and fell asleep on the couch.

Sometime in the night he was awakened by a disturbing dream about Bannister. Bannister and Limpy and the words from the good book about the lost sheep.

He dressed and wrapped himself in his traveling togs and walked out into the darkness. He found a sleepy proprietor inside the hotel where Bannister stayed.

"Has Pard Bannister come in yet?"

"Nope. I thought he was with you, Reverend."

"He was, but he went back toward the canyon on business."

"Well, I ain't had no report on him since he rode out with you a few days ago."

"Thank you."

THE minister walked briskly. He saddled his horse and rode out through the quiet street onto the trail. It was a strange feeling that haunted him—a floating worry, like a cloud that can't be gathered into the fingers but keeps hovering, gathering for a storm. Limpy . . . the Indian girl . . . and Pard Bannister . . .

He crossed Shattersville flat by starlight and galloped back to the Circle K. The ranch house was dark.

He dismounted and knocked.

Joe King came to the door, throwing a cowhide overcoat around himself. He struck a match to light a lantern.

"Oh, it's you, Reverend. What's up?"

"Sorry to disturb you. It's probably nothing. Bannister didn't come back to town with me and I wondered if he stopped here."

"Bannister?"

"Something strange in his actions made me worry."

"He ain't been here since he left with you."

"Then maybe he crossed the canyon after he left me," Reverend Morrison said, looking off into the shadowy blackness of the cliffs.

"He might have. You *are* worried, ain't you. Don't you figure Pard's old enough to look out for himself?"

"I awakened dreaming a scripture about the lost sheep. Just a foolish notion. I'll be riding on. Er—tell me, how is our friend Limpy getting along? I meant to ask you this afternoon."

"Fine, as far as I can tell. He's gittin' stronger. Anyone can see that the Indian gal is takin' darn good care of him."

"Yes, yes, I suppose—although—"

"Just between you and me, parson," Joe King said, "she's a mighty high class person. I hope you're not doin' a lot of unnecessary worryin'."

Reverend Morrison gave a friendly smile, although it may have been wasted on this sleepy rancher, he thought. "Your loyalty to Limpy is admirable. Well, thank you, and I'll be riding on. Good night."

He rode out toward the trail. Then, noticing that the first streak of dawn was showing faintly in the east, he abruptly turned and cut back toward the canyon.

CHAPTER XII

LIMPY listened for Wanda's footstep. She had stepped out, a few minutes ago—several minutes, he thought. And she hadn't returned.

He hadn't slept, he was almost sure. Or had he?

"Nobody's sleeping," he said to himself for the tenth time. Then, "I wonder why she doesn't come back."

She had extinguished the oil lamp, and Limpy had believed that she would fold up on her buffalo robe and sleep for the rest of the night. But all of that quiet moving around she'd done was mystifying, to say the least. He began to recount the details of the late afternoon and evening that had made him feel she was behaving unnaturally. Had Landers somehow disturbed her more than usual?

What Limpy didn't know was that Wanda had devised her own secret plan to run away. Landers had talked to her.

What Limpy didn't guess was that at this moment she was tiptoeing through the darkness, treading her way toward the upper edge of Limpy's Gulch. She had packed a few provisions in a cloth sack. She had put on one of Limpy's old coats, the coat she used for choring in cold weather.

Alone and on foot, she was starting off across the hills to the south and east, the direction of Cherokee land.

Landers had done it.

It had begun with Landers' private plans.

Landers had operated in a state of uncertainty from the hour of his fall. But one thing had stood as an obstacle to any and all plans, and at least he had found the key to its removal. The girl. He could dispatch Limpy easy enough if only she were out of the way.

Puzzling over the problem, Landers had remembered something that Bannister had told him a few weeks before. Bannister had said that the preacher and the church were disturbed over the Indian girl's residing under the same roof with Limpy. There was the key.

But Landers had dallied almost beyond the limits of his own endurance, trying to win the girl's confidence. It had been impossible. She and Limpy seemed to understand each other. Her devotion to Limpy, and her attention to his needs barred the way against Landers' friendship. A few times her chilly treatment had set Landers back on his heels hard.

However, this afternoon, while Limpy was outside, Landers had waded into his plan roughshod.

"Don't order me out of the kitchen,

Cherokee. I can dry yer dishes as good as any Irishman." Then, "I want to talk to you. Listen."

"I listen."

"You're doin' bad fer Limpy, stayin' here. Did you know that?"

The Indian girl shook her head. "I help him get well."

"People are talkin' about you, an' what they're sayin' ain't good. It ain't good fer Limpy. They call you a runaway Indian an' they say yer takin' advantage of Limpy. It's a scandal. You know what a scandal is? Well, it's somethin' bad. I heard about it all the way up the canyon."

"I'm not bad." Wanda stopped her work glared at him defiantly. "You hear me? I'm not bad."

"Don't make me laugh!" He gave an ugly snarling laugh.

"I am good. I want Limpy to live. I care for him."

"Well, maybe he doesn't care fer you, Cherokee."

"I care for him. I take care—"

"I hear the preacher an' the church folks think you should go away. An' they'll be comin' over some night and run you off—if Limpy hasn't got the nerve to do it himself."

"Limpy want me stay."

"Hah!" He came toward her threateningly. "You damn fool! You think he likes you?"

"Maybe. I don't know. I know he wants me to stay."

"Cherokee, don't you know what a silly fool you are? Don't you? Limpy don't give a damn about you. He told me so. *He told me he wished t' hell you'd go*!"

WANDA'S brown hands came up to her throat and her fingers were suddenly trembling. She was like a deer, shot while running for cover. Wounded, she kept on her path; but she would fall in a moment, for the mortal wound had struck.

"He—he tell you—?"

"He said plenty. An' I'm telling you fer yer own good. He's sick o' yer hangin' around. He'll git mad an' run off with a gun one of these days."

"No. I do not believe. You lie!"

"Are you callin' me a liar?" He was crowding her.

"I do not belive—"

"No damned squaw calls me a liar an' gits away with it. Shut up! *Shut up*!"

He backed her against the wall.

"Let go! You choke me! I call Limpy!" She tried to strike at him.

He grabbed for her wrist. She writhed out of his grasp, but he struck at her, and he landed three slaps. Again she backed against the wall like a trapped animal. One sideward flick of her eyes toward the kitchen cabinet told Landers that she was looking for a weapon. A knife in her hands would have made her as unmanageable as a rattlesnake. Landers' big left hand tightened into a knot.

She dodged fast and tried to slip past him, and he swung hard and caught her on the cheek. She fell.

For an instant she lay crouched. He stood glaring at her, his fists tight at his sides.

She got up slowly, with dignity, and it was plain that she didn't want any more fighting. But the door was at her side now, and she could make a break and run out of the house if she were threatened again. She straightened herself, adjusted her dress, and folded her arms.

"You don't have to hit me," she said quietly. "I understand your words."

Landers gave a gutteral laugh.

"All right, git smart, you damned squaw. I know what I'm talkin' about. You don't have to wait till Limpy busts you over the head with a club. If you got any brains you'll take a hint an' git out. Tonight. Before mornin' you'll put plenty o' miles between you an' the canyon. An' don't worry that Limpy'll come lookin' fer you. He won't."

"Yes. . . I leave him note."

"Don't leave no notes. Jis' go, see? After all the preacher's been sayin', Limpy won't need no note to know why you've gone."

The thought of the preacher added sharpness to all of her hurt feelings . . . The preacher's sternness, his accusing voice, his great words that she didn't understand. . . For a moment she hid her face in her hands. Then she spoke slowly.

"All right. I go away."

"Tonight."

"I go tonight. It is best for Limpy. He will not know. Do not tell him."

"Ha! You can be damn sure I won't say a word."

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN Reverend Morrison rode up over the dark trail that brought him to the south bank of the canyon, he looked to the east and saw that the faint streak of grey was by now tinged with a hint of pink. He turned westward, trying to peer through the darkness. Limpy's Gulch couldn't be seen, but another two or three miles' ride along the lip of the canyon would bring him to it.

His horse picked up its ears, having caught some sound that he had missed. He stopped and listened.

Looking back toward the light, he caught sight of a shadowy figure walking across the flat. He turned and rode in that direction.

It was Wanda, Limpy's Indian girl! She was wearing one of Limpy's dull colored coats over her bright dress. She carried a cloth pack over her shoulder. She was watching him as he rode up to her, but she kept on doggedly walking until he dismounted and stood before her.

"Good morning, Wanda. Do you remember me? I'm the minister."

"What do you want?" She folded her arms.

Reverend Morrison smiled in the hope of showing himself to be friendly. "I've come out to look for my friend Bannister. Have you seen him?"

"No."

"I feel sure he came this way." He searched her expression. She was an evasive one, all right, he thought. She was running away and she didn't want to be confronted by anyone who would thwart her. What had happened? Had she quarreled with Limpy? Or had he seen the error of his ways and invited her to leave? Reverend Morrison was in the habit of asking his questions directly, but he doubted his ability to handle Wanda.

To his surprise, then, she volunteered a very helpful bit of information.

"I see a horse with saddle. Maybe your friends."

"Indeed! Where was this horse? And where was the rider?"

"I do not see the rider. The horse is tied to rock this side of Limpy's Gulch."

The information was double edged, and Reverend Morrison considered what it implied. It was probably Bannister's horse. For some strange reason Bannister must have preferred to approach his destination on foot; and it was easy to assume that Limpy's house was his destination. But this girl had evidently not seen him.

It reflected as a compliment to the girl, he thought, that she should pass up a chance to take a horse that might have expedited her progress, wherever she was going. Reverend Morrison carried a strong belief that many Indians in such a situation would have been tempted to steal.

"A horse without a rider," he commented, now keeping pace with her as she again trudged along. "Looks to me as if you could have used that horse yourself."

"Not my horse," said Wanda, being as straightforward as anyone could be. "I walk."

"I see. Where are you going?"

"That way." She pointed to the southeast.

"I see . . . Ah—does Limpy know where you're going?"

"Limpy asleep." She stopped and turned and lifted an appealing hand to him. "You going to Limpy?"

"I'm thinking of it. I'm looking for Bannister. I had a strange hunch there was trouble. Is there?"

"I forgot to put blanket around Limpy. Afraid I wake him."

"You were afraid he'd discover you were about to leave? Is that it?" Reverend Morrison saw that he was striking close to the truth. The girl nodded. She was eager for him to perform the task that she had neglected.

"He should have blanket around his shoulders while he sleeps. You go to him. Fix him up. He should not sleep in chair. Always let other man have his bunk. Man should go away. He bring everybody trouble."

"What man?" This was a surprising outburst of news from one so habitually silent. The girl was a veritable fountain of information that seemed to well up out of a tormented soul.

"Man named Landers. He stay with us. He tell me I am runaway Indian. Everybody hate me. Someday Limpy will hate me. Someday you will come and make me go away. He tell me to go now." She put her hand to her cheek. "He make me go. I go now, so Limpy won't hate me."

"You poor child," Reverend Morrison said half under his breath. Then, "Landers, you say? . . . Landers—from up the canyon beyond Shady Grove?"

Certain details of his previous encounter with Landers flashed through his mind. There had been something mysterious between Bannister and Landers, he had realized at the time.

"I'm heading for Limpy's Gulch," he said abruptly. "I don't think you'll get far, Wanda. You'd better come back and talk it over."

"I go to my people," said Wanda. "You take care of Limpy."

"Heaven's blessings go with you my child," he said, hesitating for a backward glance. Then he spurred his horse and galloped westward.

CHAPTER XIV

LANDERS finished tying his shoes. Time was slipping away too fast. It would soon be dawn. He had meant to be many miles on his way by this time—as far as Limpy's black mare would take him. He'd ride the legs off that critter, and by night he'd have crossed into a safer territory.

Damn Limpy, why hadn't he gotten concerned about the girl's walkout an hour earlier? He must have dozed off two or three times while expecting her to return, Landers judged. But finally he'd got nervous enough about it to trudge to the door and call. She hadn't answered, and so he'd gone on out into the yard, calling her name.

By now, Landers thought, he'd have hobbled a half mile or so, perhaps to the upper edge of the gulch. He wouldn't be able to see much by starlight. Landers had thought he'd light a lantern, and that would have made it easier for Landers to carry out his plan.

Anyway it would be easy, now that

the girl was out of the picture. He'd saddle the black mare and go to Limpy offering to take Limpy around in his search. From the moment he got Limpy on the horse with him, the show would be all his. They would ride out just far enough to find the girl's tracks through a patch of water-soaked ground to the southeast, which she would inevitably cross, and there would be the place for Limpy's body to be found.

No, it would be no trick at all to get the pistol away from Limpy, once they were on the horse together. And it would be much surer to shoot him through the heart than to pitch him over the canyon; for even in his physical condition, there was always the chance that he might survive the fall.

"His body will be found near the girl's tracks," Landers said to himself confidently. "They'll assume she shot him as she was running away on foot. If they catch her, they'll demand to know why she did it, and she'll deny everything. Then—"

His monolog came to a stop at that point, for he knew plainly enough that she would not only deny all charges, but would instantly put a sure finger on *him*. Then the facts would emerge—his disappearance, and that of Limpy's horse—ha! They'd be just twenty-four hours late in discovering what had really happened. By that time he'd have galloped over a few boundary lines.

A knife? Where the hell did that Cherokee hide the knives? He had meant to pick up one, just in case—but Wanda had either taken it herself, or had heeded some intuition to put it where it would be out of his hands. He wouldn't light a lantern. No time to waste in looking. He swung into his coat.

He slipped his own saddle off the hook. Outside the door he listened for a moment. Such sounds as the darkness brought him came from the corral. Was it possible that Limpy was going to try to mount and ride?

"Limpy!" he called.

"Yeah. I'm down here."

"What's wrong?"

"Wanda's gone. I've gotta find her."

"I'll help you," Landers called back. It wasn't going to happen quite as he'd planned it, but it would be easy. But he mustn't be caught coming out with his own saddle. He dropped it back of the bushes by the shanty. Maybe there'd be a chance to pick it up later. But time was short. There was already a faint streak of light in the east. "I'll saddle yer nag fer you, if you ain't in too much of a hurry." Limpy didn't answer, so he added, "I'm comin'. Gimme time."

LIMPY had the job done by the time he reached the corral gate.

"I figgur I kin still ride, in spite of carryin' a load o' dead weight," Limpy said as he closed the corral gate back of the mare. "I can't make out why she'd leave in the night this way."

"She's walkin' out on you. Here. I'll give you a boost."

Limpy's nerves were on trigger edge. He thought he was watching everything; in so far as the darkness permitted. He was never for an instant unaware that Landers' presence meant danger.

In Limpy's vivid thoughts, Landers had come to represent treachery. If Landers was the man, he was here to strike again. He would stab or shoot the first time he was given an unguarded moment.

But Landers didn't have a gun, and Limpy did. The pistol was in his belt, ready. And that protection had kept Landers at bay.

These reflections flashed through Limpy's mind as he heard the man offer to help him on the horse.

Suddenly Landers changed his offer.

"Wait a minute," Landers barked. "I'll git on an' pull you up. I'll ride you around wherever you want to go."

"I can ride."

"I'll take you around." The savage note in Landers' voice was matched by his actions. He had started to boost Limpy up, but suddenly he was pulling him down. Not carefully but violently.

Limpy obeyed his instinct. That bullet in his back—that heavy, sluggish bum leg—he didn't dare risk an injury. With both hands he reached for the saddle horn, and at the same instant he kicked with his good leg—the old limping leg with the twisted foot. He kicked not with his foot, however, but with his knee. It might have been an accidental bump. Landers gave a backward jerk.

Limpy's action spurred the mare into a forward leap, and so he was plunging along, hanging from one side of the saddle.

But Landers wasn't shaken off. Instead, he hung to Limpy's belt just long enough to get what he wanted. Limpy felt the gun slide out of his belt. He heard it fall. He knew that Landers' hands would be on it in another instant, and then—

There was no chance in the world for Limpy, then, except to dash ahead as fast as the mare would take him. He swung up for a better hold. The mare gave a sideward leap, as if sensing that her one-sided burden called for a tricky escape; then she broke into a gallop.

Bang! A wild shot whizzed past. At such close range the second could hardly miss. Limpy jerked the mare's rein, then, and swerved toward the shanty. If he could fall—if he could roll into the door on the way past—but no, any fall might be fatal. He hugged the mare's neck, and tried to throw his weight around to the front.

The second bullet had been postponed. He was hearing the shouts of someone's voice and it wasn't Landers'.

"You're covered, Landers, and I've got you at point blank if you make another move."

It was the voice of Pard Bannister!

"Where the hell did you come from?" Landers roared.

LIMPY halted by the door, deep grey in the first light of dawn. It was hard to discern the figures who faced each other only a few yards from him.

"You ain't got the right man," Landers snarled, "Our victim is over there on the hoss, and he's gonna slip outa our hands—"

"Shut up, Landers. You can give that gun a kick this direction," Pard ordered. "You rung me in on it once, but what you did wasn't my idea. An' I'm makin' up fer it now."

"I'll kill you fer this," Landers snapped.

"You ain't gonna kill nobody any more. I'm draggin' you back to the sheriff, an I'm tellin' everything."

"What you'll tell won't look so good fer you, Pard. They'll likely string you up right along with me."

Limpy was working fast. He hobbled in at the door and seized a rope. He was puzzled about Bannister's appearance, but the two men were holding each other in a deadlock. With one ear he listened. Landers was being much too optimistic, Limpy thought; he still took for granted that he could swing Bannister in line and that the two of them could finish the job here and ride like hell for a more congenial climate.

"You think I don't aim to split? Is that it?" Landers growled.

Bannister wouldn't budge. He had evidently slipped back this way because he'd got wind of Limpy's visitor, and he meant to clear things.

"I'm cleanin' my slate, Landers, an' you with it, by god! I don't team up with men who shoot in the back!"

The black mare stamped impatiently at the door. But Limpy moved out the other way, rope in hand, and he got to the shed before Landers saw him. Landers yelled.

"Look out, there. He's fixin' to shoot!"

Landers made a false dodge, and that was enough to catch Bannister off his guard. He bounded at Bannister, wrenched the pistol from his hand, and pointed it at his heart.

Bang! The report echoed through the canyon. Bannister lay in a heap.

Limpy stood in the doorway of the shed and saw Bannister fall.

THE next fire from the gun came in Limpy's direction. Three shots came helter-skelter, and their sounds melted together in the angry echoes of the canyon.

The shots might have been true if Limpy's rope hadn't been truer. The loop fell over Landers' shoulders, and just as he raised his hand to fire at Limpy, the sharp jerk on the rope threw him to the ground. The shot went wild.

Limpy threw the other end of the rope around a sack of cement that he dragged from the doorway of the shed, and he tried to knot it. Landers was firing from the ground, up on one elbow, taking aim.

Another hard jerk at the rope—and another—and twice again Limpy had saved himself. Then Landers was scrambling to get out of his trap. Once out, he wouldn't be hurried. He could walk into Limpy slowly, and Limpy would never in the world be able to run, walk, or crawl out of range fast enough.

But Limpy had knotted the end of the rope around the cement sack, and as Landers tried to free himself, Limpy drew in on the rope, as if playing with an angry steer. Landers stumbled, and the rope had him. But he still had the gun. He charged forward. For an instant the rope went slack.

Limpy's arms and shoulders gave, in that moment, with the almost superhuman power that he had stored up in them. He hurled the sack of cement, and it cleared the edge of the cliff, pulling the rope after it.

Landers had a sure thing of his shot at Limpy until the slack went out of the rope. Then he flew off his feet as if he'd been smacked by a bolt of lightning. The pistol whirled out of his hand. He bounded over the edge of the rock and went down. Limpy could hear his cry, going down, and down, and then there was the sound that made Limpy feel a trifle faint. But wonderfully relieved.

Limpy draped himself over the most comfortable couch he could find, which happened to be the other sack of cement and allowed his eyes to go closed for one relaxing moment. Then he rose and hobbled over to Bannister. There was no life left in the poor fellow.

An hour later, in something of a mental whirl, he related the happenings to Reverend Morrison.

"I should have come sooner," the minister said over and over. "I knew it."

"I'm sorry about Bannister, Reverend. Especially when he'd come to clear himself. I reckon that's what you did fer him, an' if you hadn't done it, Landers woulda got me, no doubt about that. I'm too crippled up to be any match fer his calibre."

"You *were* a match for him, as it turned out," the minister said, "in spite of your disadvantage. . . . And that's the way it sometimes happens. It happened to me about an hour ago, as I was coming over."

"How do you mean?"

"Someone that has none of the advantages I have turned out to be quite a match for me."

"I don't get it."

"I bumped into Wanda. She was hiking across the flat."

"Huh?" Limpy's eyes opened wide.

"And the simple, honest words she said to me were something I couldn't match with all my knowledge of right and wrong. She won me over, Limpy. She's a fine girl. She walked out because Landers made her believe it was best for you."

Limpy was on his two feet, and there the nerves in his once paralyzed leg seemed quicker and surer, and the things he cared for were clear in his mind.

"I've got to find her. I've got to bring her back. If you'll help me into the saddle—"

"You're sure that's what you want, Limpy?"

"I'm damned sure, if you'll pardon the expression. An' we'll want you to fix up some kind o' ceremony fer us, as soon as the time's right."

The minister guided Limpy along the path. He glanced at the sunshine, and then he smiled. "I believe the easiest way to get her back will be for me to go after her."

Limpy frowned. "I don't know. She's been kinda troubled—"

"Over me?"

"Well, I don't like to put it just that way."

"I understand, Limpy. But I feel more like riding than you do. So I'll tell you what you do. You take your red blanket and walk up there to the ridge and hold it up in the sun, so it can be seen for many miles away."

"Huh? I don't get it."

"It'll work," Reverend Morrison said, chuckling confidently. "When I ride up to her and have her look back, and tell her you're waiting for her to put the blanket around your shoulders—she'll come."

Limpy smiled. "I reckon you're right."

BIG MEN—BIG BULLETS!

by ART CAHILL

The bigger they are, the harder they fall—sometimes!

EVERYTHING about the old West was big—big country, big men, big bullets! Particularly the last—westerners went for big heavy "loads" and bigger, heavier bullets. Why were the .44 and .45 so popular? Why were heavy rifles and buffalo guns so widely used?

The answer is not difficult to find when you realize the difference between a light bullet and a heavy one. There is almost no comparison between the stopping power of say, a .32 and a .45. It is a well known fact that a man need not be vitally hit with a .45 to be effectively stopped.

This stopping property of a heavy bullet is very desirable, especially when you are dealing with large powerful animals that practically have to be clubbed to be brought down—or worse, fanatical men who require equally great shocks to be stopped.

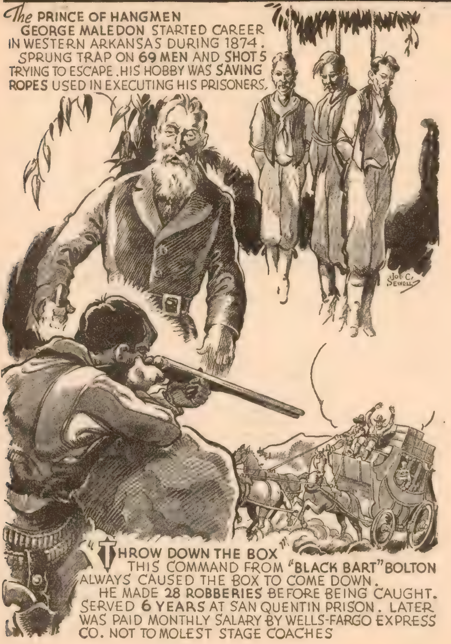
FOR these reasons, heavy guns were liked by most—not all—westerners. They knew that when once they had hit their targets, it was a good bet that those same targets, no matter where they had been hit, wouldn't move again. This was a comforting feeling, inspiring great confidence in one's weapons.

Experience with heavy bullets in the West proved invaluable to the country as a whole. At the turn of the century when we had won the Spanish-American war and were in the process of occupying the Philippine Islands, the army learned that there was only one way to stop some of the fanatical natives, the Moros, in their charges against American soldiers. That method was with a heavy solid .45. Many of the soldiers were from the west and had gotten their experience with .45's. This experience they put to practical use by demanding a bullet heavy enough to stop a Moro bent on death and suicide. Eventually we developed the .45 automatic.

REFLECTIONS *from the*

The PRINCE OF HANGMEN

GEORGE MALEDON STARTED CAREER IN WESTERN ARKANSAS DURING 1874. SPRUNG TRAP ON **69 MEN** AND **SHOT 5** TRYING TO ESCAPE. HIS HOBBY WAS **SAVING ROPES** USED IN EXECUTING HIS PRISONERS.

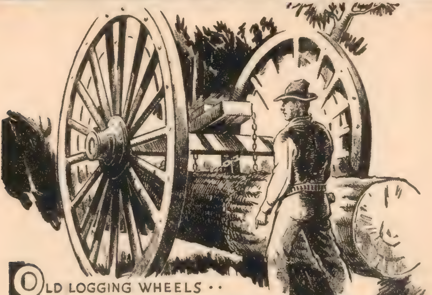


"THROW DOWN THE BOX"

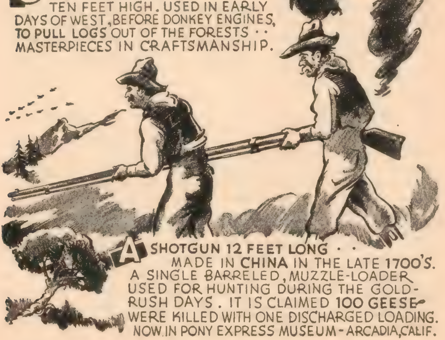
THIS COMMAND FROM **"BLACK BART" BOLTON** ALWAYS CAUSED THE BOX TO COME DOWN.

HE MADE **28 ROBBERIES** BEFORE BEING CAUGHT. SERVED **6 YEARS** AT SAN QUENTIN PRISON. LATER WAS PAID MONTHLY SALARY BY WELLS-FARGO EXPRESS CO. NOT TO MOLEST STAGE COACHES

WEST'S EARLY DAYS



OLD LOGGING WHEELS ·· TEN FEET HIGH. USED IN EARLY DAYS OF WEST, BEFORE DONKEY ENGINES, **TO PULL LOGS** OUT OF THE FORESTS ·· MASTERPIECES IN CRAFTSMANSHIP.



A SHOTGUN 12 FEET LONG · · MADE IN **CHINA** IN THE LATE 1700'S. A SINGLE BARRELED, MUZZLE-LOADER USED FOR HUNTING DURING THE GOLD-RUSH DAYS. IT IS CLAIMED **100 GEESE** WERE KILLED WITH ONE DISCHARGED LOADING. NOW IN PONY EXPRESS MUSEUM - ARCADIA, CALIF.

"...YOU CAME TO KILL"

by Alexander Blade

WHEN a man's been away from his home town for quite a while, things are bound to change. But memories of love — and hatred still remain!

THE door opened and closed softly. The man on the bed heard the sound, soft as it was, but did not turn his glance from the scene outside the window.

Doctor Herold James cleared his throat, put on his professional look and said:

" 'Morning, Tim. How do you feel today?"

The man known as Tim Hogan moved his head slowly around until he was facing Doctor James, let his lips part in a shallow grin and said:

"That's funny, doc . . ."

"Funny?" A puzzled wrinkle formed on the doctor's forehead. "What's funny?"

". . . Six months now, you've been coming in here at least once a day, sometimes more, an' this is the first time you asked me how I feel," Hogan continued as though there hadn't been any interruption. James had noticed that peculiarity about Hogan long ago in their association. Nothing could disturb a train of thought in the patient's mind, once it had begun to roll. Hogan continued: "Must be something powerful important makes you ask that."

James marveled in silence at the other's shrewdness. But he allowed nothing of his feelings to show as he said:

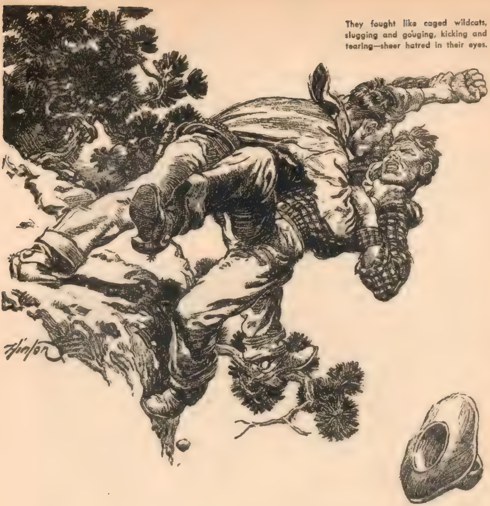
"It is, Tim, to you. You're going home. . . ."

The shadow which fell across Hogan's eyes at the doctor's words were noticed but only because of the other's keen perception and knowledge born of nine month's intimacy, the intimacy of doctor and patient in constant meeting.

"Home, eh?" Hogan said carefully. It was as if he were picking his way among unaccustomed words. "Home. . . . What's home like to you, doc?"

James didn't answer immediately. He stepped around and managed to sit with some discomfort on the window sill. He sat in profile to the man on the bed and sitting that way it was hard for Hogan to look into the other's eyes. James wanted it that way. The waters of the Pacific rolled in constant flux against the rocky, cove-lined shore, smashing here in fine-flung spray, and there in mountainous waves, as though once in gentle reproof of its prison and again in wild anger.

"I—I don't know, Tim," James began. "Oh, I suppose it hasn't changed much physically. A fishing town on the Atlantic isn't much different I guess, from a fishing town on the Pacific, except in size and location. People who



They fought like caged wildcats, slugging and gouging, kicking and tearing—sheer hatred in their eyes.

love to fish or who do it for a living are the same all over, reticent, inbred, slow-thinking folk.

"But I *have* been away a long time. I wonder whether the impact of war ***has*** changed things, people. . . . It ***must*** have. Well, I'll find out soon enough, Tim. I'm going home too. Which is the reason you're also going. The Colonel asked me if I thought you were in a dischargeable condition and I said, yes. But I'm wandering. You asked me what home was like to me.

"Home to me is the slope of a hill down to the meadowland just before the hollow. The murmur of the lazy brook at the bend from LeCroix's place where it enters my land. The sudden view of the sea when I pass Abel's Point. . . . Or maybe it's the Portuguese fisherman standing shoulder-slumped against the First State Bank and watching the Harvard crew-cuts showing the sights to their dates from

Bryn Mawr. Home is a *feeling* in you, Tim. Nothing explainable, I think. . . ."

"Yeah," Tim said in his slow drawl. "That's it. Nothing explainable. But at least it's something you *know,* something you can grab hold of when you see it and say, *this* is it. *This* is home! What about me . . . ?"

JAMES moved around so swiftly he slid from the window and had to reach a steadying hand to the bed post. His thin lips formed an even thinner line and his eyes narrowed.

"Easy, Tim!" he said sharply. "Let's not go into that again. I thought we'd passed that stage. Because if we haven't, I'll. . . ."

"Don't worry, doc," Tim broke in. "I was just thinking. It's going to feel kinda strange comin' home."

"Strange and perhaps worse," James said thoughtfully. "People whom you once knew intimately will be strangers to you. They might even think you are crazy. But I think the work we've done with you has conditioned you for any event which may arise. . . ."

"I know, doc," Hogan said, a little quicker than was his wont. "I'm all right. As all right as you can make me. And don't think I'm not grateful. It's just tough not knowing . . . me. Tim Hogan. That's my name. And I come from Hammer, New Mexico, whatever that is. I'm an orphan. . . ."

"Tim," James said, breaking in gently on the other. "Hammer is where you were born and lived and registered to get in this late mess. You don't have to go back there. The government is quite willing to send you anywhere in the country. But you are a *shock case.* The associations of home, people you once knew will act as a therapeutic agent. You will get well. . . . Uh, uh. You *are* well. But because of what happened to you, there are certain blank spaces in your memory. Those blank spaces can be filled up as memory returns. And I am certain it will. Hammer is the catalyst which will make it return. Understand, Tim?"

Hogan made a small sucking sound with his lips, shook his head in an affirmative answer and smiled brightly up at the lean, intelligent face bent over him.

"Got it, doc. And thanks again. If ever I can do something for you . . . ?"

"I know, Tim," James said. He extended his hand in a firm grip, shook the other hand hard, and turned and left. . . .

Tim Hogan squinted against the sun, pulled the brim of his hat lower on his forehead and started toward the main street which began shortly after the depot at which the train had dumped him. His lip curled as he turned a corner past the grey-dusted feed elevator, and saw what Hammer, New Mexico was.

Twin rows of shabby, false-front stores lined a dusty thoroughfare which was little more than a wagon rut. Every other false-front seemed a saloon. There were two obvious exceptions. One was a box-shaped building, some three stories high. The slope of a porch began at the bottom level of the second-story windows and ran down to shade the dust-covered plate-glass window upon which some traveling tinker had gold-leafed the legend, Palais Royal Hotel. Several straight-backed chairs kept company with two rattan-rockers, the bottoms of which could be clearly seen past the framework. These chairs were set upon a platform which rose two steps above the wooden walk.

The other exception was a rambling one-storied building, perhaps the width of three of the other stores. A rail hitching post ran the full width of the building. Although several of the saloons had horses tied to the rails before their tawdry fronts, this was the only building which had buggies and surreys as well as cowponies tied to its rail.

A narrow wooden sign, which hung suspended from a chain framework, read, Higgin's General Store.

HOGAN had stopped at the nearest of the saloons along the main street, laced the single grip he had at his feet and leaned his weight against the rail. His eyes were sharp in focus trying to place every single item no matter the size or shape, within his mind. But though they registered there wasn't a single thing which brought forth the echo of memory. He started to lean forward preparatory to picking up his grip and stopped. Someone had come out of the hotel's dark interior onto the porch.

Tim Hogan had the eyes of a hawk. He saw a medium-sized man in faded jeans and shirt of the same blue color. The man was hatless and his head, even from this distance showed leonine, massive, with whitish hair falling to the shoulders. The profile was distinct, sharp, from the great curving beak of a nose, to the high sweep of forehead and strong line of chin.

The man carried a broom with which he lost no time in starting to sweep. Why Tim developed a grin on his lips he didn't know, yet he had a feeling it had to do with the man on the hotel porch. Ears attuned to the sound of twig's scrape, heard the oiled hinges swing on the doors of the saloon behind him. Booted feet clumped on the board walk. Tim turned slowly and looked at the man coming slowly toward him from the still-swinging doors of the saloon.

One glance and the man's nationality was known. The man was a Mexican. Short, slender, he had a narrow womanish face highlighted by a finely-chiseled aquiline nose and strong chin. Snapping dark eyes grinned up at the face of Tim, a grin which was companion to the one on his lips. A pair of .44's swung against the lean shanks of the Mexican.

"Greetings, my friend," the Mexican said.

Tim's head went up and down slowly. He didn't know why but he felt an odd sort of liking for this man.

"They told me in there," the Mexican said, "that they don't like for Felipe Sapota to drink their rotgut. . . ."

Tim realized suddenly that the Mexican was a little drunk. Yet it was not to be seen except in small things, the tiny slurring of the sibilant in Sapota's last name, the faint tinge of blood in the dark eyes.

". . . They say Greasers are not welcome in Hammer. . . ."

"They?" Tim asked quietly. "Who are they?"

Sapota's eyes went wide and the grin grew broader until it gave voice to a high, thin laugh.

"My friend! You are *indeed* a stranger. Luckily, you are not a Mexican. Of course neither am I. . . ." The shoulders went up in a Latin shrug. "But they do not ask for my birth record. They say only, 'get the hell out of here, Greaser!' "

Tim's eyes held silent echoes of the other's laughing tones as he bent them in a look directed toward the other's guns.

". . . Tied down?" Tim asked.

The other's hand made blurred movements and the twin .44's glinted in the late afternoon sun.

"Not bad," Tim said. "Pretty good, in fact. You c'n only die once. . . ."

"In *my* time," Sapota said. "I like you, my friend. It is not often Felipe Sapota likes a man when first he meets him. You are lucky, indeed, to have my affectionate regard."

THE talk was broken into unexpectedly. Once more the swinging doors swung but this time four men came out, all walking slowly and purposefully toward the two at the edge of the walk. One strode heavily on bowed legs in advance, the others, their hands noticeably close to the guns on their hips, slightly behind the leader. As the first man stepped squarely before Tim and Felipe, the others formed a shallow circle about them.

"I thought I told you to get the hell out of town?" the stranger asked.

Tim sized the speaker up in one quick glance. He didn't like what he saw, a heavy figure, thick-shouldered, bull-necked, thick-fleshed face whose narrow piggish eyes looked mean and vicious, and whose wide-nostrilled nose seemed like that of an animal. Curling oily hair showed blackly behind the man's grey hat and curled around the ears. The man wore brown trousers tucked into his boots, a shirt fancy with lace which had once been pressed but which now showed ragged edges. Covering the short was a black broadcloth jacket. There were no visible guns.

Felipe was silent to the man's question. The stranger's grin grew more evil more vicious. Suddenly he stepped forward and slapped viciously with an open palm at Felipe's face. Felipe's head snaped back at the impact. Gone was the laughter from the Mexican's eyes and mouth. A blank look replaced the laugh in the eyes and the mobile mouth slitted thinly.

"I said to get the . . ." the stranger began. He didn't get further than that. For a fist knocked the rest of the sentence down his throat. Tim had acted without thought of consequence. He moved with such suddenness he caught the three gunman off balance. And before they could act, Tim had whirled their leader about and held him close against his own body.

"Better not," Tim said loudly. "This heel isn't made of steel." He didn't give them a chance to recover. "Turn around," he commanded as with a quick movement of his right hand he dipped under the waistcoat of the man he held and withdrew the gun in the shoulder holster he had felt when he whirled the other about. "Go on!" Tim's voice was oddly brittle as he waved the pistol about slowly.

"Do as he says," the leader said.

"Take their hardware," Tim commanded Felipe.

There was nothing slow in the way Felipe moved. In a few seconds he was back at Tim's side.

"Break 'em and throw the cartridges away," Tim said.

And again the sun of Felipe's smile broke on the curving lips. One after the other the six guns were emptied. Tim motioned with the gun hand for them to move over to the wall and keep their hands high. When they had done so he shoved their leader forward. He stumbled and would have fallen had not one of them offered a steadying hand.

"I don't know what this is all about," Tim said. "But nobody pulls the kind of trick you were going to, while I'm around. As for you, you yellow-bellied four-flusher," he pointed his remark to the thick-bodied leader who was wiping a trickle of blood from a cut Tim had opened on his mouth, "if you want your hardware, I'll be over at the hotel. Come and get it alone or with the rest of your rats. . . ."

Not a word was said as Tim, with Felipe dogging his heels started down the dusty stretch of street.

TIM looked neither right or left as he trudged toward the general store yet he was aware of glances thrown at him from hidden places.

Though he showed nothing of what was in his mind Tim fairly boiled mentally in agitation. Soon many things should be clear to him. Perhaps he might even remember . . . ? He stole a glance at the carefree Mexican striding at his side. Felipe, too, seemed unaware of those hidden looks from the shelter of wooden walls. But now and then his lips would curve delicately and his hands swung low and carefully near his guns.

A middle-aged couple came out of the door of the large general store just as Tim and his friend reached it. The man and woman gave the two men a quick stare and turned their glances aside and hurried to a buckboard with their loads of groceries and sundries. It didn't take a great mind to see that they had seen the play of near-violence and were hurrying to get away.

Tim's eyes shadowed again. There hadn't been the slightest sign of recognition in either face.

Felipe swung the door open and waiting until Tim stepped within, moved like a shadow behind. The place was larger than even the impression of size Tim had of it from the outside. Several dozen stands held merchandise on display for ready sale. Three of the four walls were lined with shelves before which were sales counters. All sorts of farm utensils, but none of large size, leaned against the rear counter. There were some eight or ten people in the store and waiting on them were three salespeople, a middle-aged man in faded dark trousers and blue shirt, a slender youngster in his teens and a young woman in slacks and blouse. It was the girl who spotted the two men.

Tim walked toward her as though she were a magnet which drew him implacably forward. She looked away from the woman on whom she was waiting and stared with lifted eyebrows to Tim.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

Tim hesitated a bare second, then replied:

"Uh, yes. I'd liked to get fitted . . . everything. From guns to Levi's."

"No boots?" she asked smilingly.

He answered the smile with one of his own.

"If you've got them that big," he said.

She bent from the waist and peered over the counter.

"I guess we can," she said after returning to a normal stance. "We manage to take care of Sven Soldstrom and he wears size 15. You look like about a ten or eleven."

A slow warmth stole over Tim's belly. He didn't know who this girl was but he liked her. She continued to smile into his eyes.

"Now Sally Higgins," a woman's voice broke in.

They both turned to look at the prim-faced woman in the small-checkered housedress on whom the girl had been waiting.

". . . . Maybe you'd better finish waitin' on me? My man's waiting for those cans. . . ."

"I'm sorry, Miz Garland," the girl said hastily. "That was rude of me. I'll have Joe bring them over to your truck. Will that be all?"

"I guess so. Need a few cans of that vegetable soup but we can manage without till you get a fresh stock. . . ."

"In just a couple of days," the girl said. "I'll have Joe run the canned goods up to your place."

The woman smiled pleasantly, nodded to Tim, and started to go off. But after a few steps, she turned back and said:

"I don't know who you are, mister, but Asa Temple don't take two things like you and Felipe pulled, kindly. Better keep your hands low and ready. . . ."

WHEN the woman had turned to leave the girl had motioned toward the young fellow who came on the run. He had stopped and listened to the following conversation with wide-open jaws and drooping chin. Suddenly he said:

"Gees! What happened to your face, mister?"

Tim's right hand went up slowly to his face and across his nose and chin. He couldn't feel anything. The doc had said he may in time get a feeling in the new face he had been given.

"Joe!" the girl's voice was sharp in reproof. "Now run along with Miz Garland's order."

"Don't mind him, mister," she went on as Joe followed the woman toward the door. "He's just a kid. . . ."

"Oh that's all right," Tim said. "I guess I'll get used to it."

"And now let's get to what you want," the girl said.

THE guns felt heavy, yet oddly ***right***, swinging against his thighs. He took the flat-brimmed low-crowned black hat and shoved it on his head. The boots were a bit stiff but he knew after a day's wear they'd work in. Felipe, sitting in one of the chairs for shoe customer's, looked up admiringly at the tall figure posing in the mirror.

"As a picture of a fighting man you look just right. Which brings something to mind. Asa Temple's gun. He prizes it like a farmer prizes a blooded bull. There are a dozen notches each for a man he shot in the back or while his gun boys were covering the victim."

The girl had stepped to the cash register for change. Tim took a hurried look over his shoulder to see if she was on her way back and seeing she was still busy at the till, replied:

"I'll keep it for a while. Is there a place to eat in town. . . . ?"

Felipe started to say when the girl came back. There were several bills and some change in her open palm as she extended them toward Tim.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But I forgot to make out a receipt. What's the name, please?"

"That's all right," Tim said.

"It's for bookkeeping purposes," she said. "And if you don't mind giving me the address I can send your other clothes along with Joe when he come back. Save you a trip."

"That's all right," Tim reiterated, this time with more firmness. "I don't need them anymore. And thanks. . . ."

There was a quiver of wonder on her arched brows as she watched the two men stride to the door and disappear into the fading sunlight.

THE two men walked side by side and there was something odd about them now. Tim had looked like another man from the east in his store-bought clothes. Now, even though his Western clothes were new, somehow they looked like he'd exchanged something foreign for habits of a lifetime. It was in his long-limbed stride, in the way his arms swung loosely and the sudden slight bowing of his legs as though they were itching to fork a horse's withers. But it is an indefinable something which some might call, latent power, that the change was most noticeable. It radiated from every inch of his being.

When they were several yards removed from the Palais Royal hotel Felipe said:

"Shiny new clothes—creaky boots—unbroke guns—nothing left of the old Tim Hogan, is there?"

Only Tim's eyes moved in a quick shifting glance as he said:

"Tim Hogan. . . . That's what they said my name was at the hospital. You're the first to call me that. That shell that hit sure must have messed me up, eh?"

"Is that what it is? H'm," Felipe wanted Tim to tell him more. He continued to prompt: "You sure came back a stranger, and maybe it's a good thing. . . ."

They stopped at the beginning of the canopied walk of the hotel. Tim swung around to face his shorter, slighter companion.

"Don't string it along, Felipe," Tim said softly. "I guessed you knew me when you came out of the saloon. And I must have known you also. Yet no one else recognized me. The mask doc gave me hides the Tim Hogan you used to know pretty well, doesn't it?"

"Only the face," Felipe said. "Remember, you were leaning over the rail. . . . Well, the Tim Hogan I used to run with had a habit of snapping the fingers of his left hand. But the right was always down near his belt for a quick draw if things turned bad. . . ."

"So you used to run with me?" Tim asked. "You and who else?"

"Asa Temple," Felipe said softly.

THE eminence commanded a view of the whole valley, yet by the standards of the surrounding mesas the cliff was neither as high or sharply etched. But by a queer contrivance of one of nature's whims it had been upthrust in such a manner that it served Asa Temple's purpose perfectly. And Temple's purposes were always evil. For concealed by a narrow though hidden shoulder Temple held court in a tar-paper cabin.

The short bit of flat ground before the single door of the make-shift cabin was used as a tethering place for the six hard-bitten tough cowponies which nibbled at stray bits of grass. Each of the horses had been made fast to either one of the branches of the lonely mesquite or to one of the barrels which was used for the hauling of water. Within the cabin itself, seven men sat or stood about, six of them in the rough gear of cowmen. The seventh sat at the table by himself, a bottle of whiskey before him. The bottle had been hit hard though not by the man sitting there.

One of the men standing against the jamb of the door with thumbs hooked in belt, said:

"We got our best chance now, Asa. . . ."

TEMPLE shoved his chair around and scraped it backward on the rough flooring and threw both booted legs up on the deal table.

"No, not now, but soon. Time enough for us. The cooperative's fixing for a big shipment. That's for us to move in. First off we got to figure this out right. No slip-ups. . . ."

One of the other men, a tall bearded man with a knife scar which ran the whole length of one jaw and which gave him a more sullen look than was his natural wont, broke in:

"Too much figgerin' if you ast me. . . ."

"No one asked you, Yeager," Temple said sharply. "And no one's goin' to ask you either."

"Sure," Yeager said. "Like when you bust up with the Mex, Felipe. That Mex could smell a remuda a mile away an' he could do things with a hoss like he was part of it."

Asa Temple's lips became a straight line that was like a thin strip of scar tissue so bloodless was it.

"You been talkin' before, Yeager," he said thinly. "But when it comes to takin' your split you're always quiet. I'm gettin' a bit tired of that mouth goin' when I don't want it to. . . ."

Of a sudden the man leaning against the door jamb was no longer just leaning casually. His hands were still hooked in the belt but loosely now. The others felt the tension which was in the air like electricity during a storm. The nearest moved aside. Eyes became sharp, nerves tensed, hands fell to gun butts. But the man at the table suddenly smiled.

It wasn't a smile of humor. It was rather a twisting of the lips, a wry twist of evil.

"Don't be a fool, Yeager," Temple said. "Even Tim Hogan wouldn't chance it. Six agin one. . . ."

For the barest second the tableaux held. Yeager broke first. A quiver of a grin broke on his lips.

"Yeah. Guess you're right, boss. Me an' my big mouth. Sure. Do it the way you like. Me, I just go along."

"That's the way to talk, Yeager," Temple said. "I need you men just like you need me. Got to stick together. I mean it. Come over and shake. . . ."

Yeager's mouth grinned wider, his hands fell away from the belt and he started forward. For just the instant of his first movement he was off-balance. In that instant, Temple moved. His right hand clawed downward and sideways and when it came out from the fastness of the dark jacket steel glinted from the reflection of the Kolman lantern and sullen orange flame blossomed in a spitting streak.

Yeager continued in his forward movement for perhaps three short steps. His hands moved involuntarily toward the gun butts in the holsters, but as the bullets bit deep into his body he stumbled and fell forward almost landing against the man at the table.

"Yeah," Temple said softly as he sheathed the short-barreled pistol, "he talked too much. Besides I wasn't trusting him anymore. Throw him into the brush in the draw. The vultures c'n feed tonight."

THEY were five to one and Yeager had been shot in cold blood with a minimum of chance yet not one resented it. In fact one of them laughed shortly and grunted:

"Serves the idjit right. He always liked to lick-spittle after Tim Hogan anyways. Here, Josh, gimme a hand with him. . . ."

Temple waited until the two returned before he elaborated:

"Havens, over at the Bar-S, told me t'other day that the way the eastern market's moving it pays to feed good and ship heavy. Prices are going sky-high.

"That's why we've got to wait a few days. There'll be more cattle in the draw. . . ."

"Okay with us, boss," the one called, Josh, said. "But what's with the Higgins' gal?"

"How do you mean, Josh?" Temple asked.

"Well, before Tim Hogan went off he promised to come back an' without actin' like I'm scared, I got this to say. Tim was the most cold-blooded man I ever did see. He learned too late what happened at Gayamos Pass. But he promised that he'd never forget or forgive. I don't like this foolin' with Sally Higgins. . . ."

"Shut up!" this time the anger on Temple's face was not hidden. His feet clattered to the floor as he swung swiftly from where he was sitting and strode to Josh. He gripped the man's shirt with one hand and with the other swung his fist several times against the other's jaw, rocking his head back and forth with each blow and with the last cutting his lips wide open so that the blood poured out in a crimson stream. Every time he swung his arm he shouted, "Shut up. . . . Shut up!"

At last Temple released the other and stepped back, his breath whistling through his distended nostrils.

"I don't want to hear about Tim Hogan! The Higgins woman has nothing to do with any of you. Understand?"

There were muttered sounds of assent but the faces of the men showed resentment at the way Temple had slapped Josh around. No one had liked Yeager; he had been a troublemaker and worse. But Josh was harmless. If it weren't for his being a fine cowman they would have gotten rid of him long ago, he was such a coward. Still, they felt that Josh had a right to speak up as he had.

As if realizing what their sullen looks meant, Temple quieted down and said:

"About Tim Hogan let's just remember this. Tim had one failing, his temper. I told him always to watch it but he couldn't. He got us in a jam at Los Gatoros. And again with the Sheriff down near Las Cruces. So I fixed his clock but good. That was a while back wasn't it? Even before he went off to the war. He didn't do anything about it then and he won't now, that is if he's alive. Tim had a way with a gun but he always knew he wasn't as fast as me. Nobody in these parts is. Now let's get back to the remuda they're fixing up for us and forget Tim Hogan. . . ."

FELIPE tried to puncture the darkness with his glance but he could see nothing of his companion's face except the sharp profile of nose and chin. A sigh welled from Tim's throat.

"So that's the story of Tim Hogan," he said.

"And like all stories," Felipe said gently, "hearsay. No one knew Tim. Not even I who was perhaps closest to him. It was my regret, that I, in whose veins runs the blood of the Conquistadores, could not pass the physical tests. But to get back to you, Tim, you were a crazy kid. I never understood why you took up with Asa Temple. He was twenty years your senior. . . ."

"There must have been a reason," Tim said suddenly savage. "I felt it all along inside me. That's why I came back. Hell! I could have stayed in Frisco or gone somewhere else, yet something pulled me here. And now I don't know what. What is there here, Felipe, for me?"

"Sally Higgins," Felipe said. "She still waits for you even though she said she hates you."

"Hates me? But why?"

"Because you were supposed to have killed her father," Felipe replied.

Like a spring in recoil Tim leaped from the bed and jumped to Felipe's side. Both his hands shot to the slender man's shirt and pulled the other close.

"What was I supposed to have done?" Tim asked, spacing the words carefully.

"Killed Sally's father. He accused you of rustling cattle from their ranch," Felipe said as he tried to pull Tim's hands away from his shirt.

Tim let his fingers grow lax. He shook his head hard. What he had just heard was a great shock to him. It couldn't be true, he tried to tell himself. Yet how was he to know? Perhaps in a moment of anger, and there seemed no doubt that he had been a hot-headed fool. But to have killed that girl's father. He couldn't believe it.

"Who saw it, Felipe? Who was there?"

"Take it easy, Tim," Felipe said. "Let me explain. No one saw you—except Asa Temple and two of his friends, a man named, Yeager, and another called, Hoot. They swore you shot old man Higgins after he had called you something and dared you to go for your gun. There's a hole in their story big enough to drive an elephant through, though. They said you shot Higgins in the back. . . ."

"So?" Tim asked tersely.

"So. . . . I knew Tim, I told you. Better than most men get to know their brothers. Tim Hogan wasn't that kind. If he and Higgins had a name—calling contest Tim would have given Higgins every break. What's more, I don't think Tim was even there."

Once more Tim went tense. He stiffened and straightened and waited for Felipe to elaborate on what he started to say.

"In the first place Asa Temple had set the sheriff's men on Tim. He told Carnish, who was sheriff then, that Tim had engineered the Bar-S job which was the biggest rustling job ever done in the whole state. Tim had to run for his freedom. He was hiding up to Larengo somewhere in those twisted canyons and mesas when he was supposed to have met up with Higgins. . . ."

Suddenly Tim snapped his fingers. He had known from the instant Felipe began his explanation that something was not quite right with the story.

"Wait a minute, Felipe," Tim said. "That's a good story you're trying to sell. But remember one thing. Tim Hogan volunteered from Hammer. If things were so hot for him how did he manage that?"

"Tim didn't volunteer from Hammer," Felipe said. "But Tim's twin did. . . ."

SOMETHING almost physical in its impact hit somewhere in Tim Hogan's brain. A picture so vivid it lit up the whole plane of his memory came to him. There were hedges on three sides, hedges which suddenly erupted flames and destruction. From above mortar fire rained from the skies and began a swift boxing in on the company of men caught in the fire trap, and as if to make things completely hopeless men scrambled at a run from two walls of the hedged prison.

As swiftly as it had begun the mortar fire lifted but not until it had accomplished its mission, pinned the Americans to immobility. Tim remembered standing and shouting for his squad to come to life; he remembered the impact of the first Nazi rush and how they fought with the savagery of beasts to repel them. There was a blank then. And another picture came to life. The dead and dying and living were a jumbled mass and men fought hand to hand and a trench tool was as good as a club and teeth and feet were enough to take a man's life. A big Nazi clung to someone's back and plunged a knife with insistent strokes into the man's back though he was already dead. Tim remembered leaping on the enemy and strangling the man with his bare hands. Then he saw once again the face of the dead American and knew he had found his twin brother. But that was all he remembered for after that there was only that train-like sound of approaching doom and the terrible roar of high-explosive hitting.

Now it was worse, Tim thought. Was he Tim Hogan or Tom Hogan? Felipe said he was Tim. But he based his conclusion on a remembered mannerism. He *could* be mistaken. Tim looked down at his hands. It was not only his face which had suffered. Three quarters of his whole skin area had suffered burns. Skin had been grafted onto every finger obliterating tell-tale marks of identification. His face had been made over. Suddenly Tim Hogan moved away from the chair and stepped to the wall and switched on the light.

"Watch," he said to the bewildered man on the bed. "And tell me who I am."

His hands moved like greased lightning and the guns blurred so swiftly did they leap from their holsters. But all Felipe did was shake his head.

"Tom was just as fast," Felipe whispered in awe. "You've got to remember you were identical twins."

"Then why didn't you tell me about Tom from the beginning?" Tim asked.

"Because you said you'd lost your memory," Felipe explained. "I thought I'd bring him in in the end if all else failed. Maybe I haven't. At least you looked as though. . . ."

"Only the last, just before the shell hit. But it's maybe the beginning of what the doc said might happen. What'll I do now, Felipe? I was lost when I came into town. How do I go about finding myself?"

"Not by saying your name's Tim Hogan," Felipe said. "You wouldn't stand a chance. Say that—wait! I've got an idea. You could say you're a buddy of Tim's or Tom's. That you promised to look up—better Tim's. You promised to look Sally Higgins up. Tell her you were in same explosion that he was in and that all you can remember is the promise you made. . . ."

"But what about my identification?" Tim asked.

"You're in Hammer. This isn't a town where the people are suspicious. Besides, you're dealing with the woman who was in love with Tim Hogan and who was the only one besides his brother and myself who didn't believe that tale about his killing old man Higgins."

"First you say the people in this town aren't suspicious then you say you and Sally are the only ones who didn't believe I killed her father. I don't get it," Tim said.

"They aren't," Felipe reiterated. "They take you at your face value. Tim Hogan *was* a killer. He *had* an uncontrollable temper. Those are facts about Tim. . . ."

"And what of Tom?" the other asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean how come Tom was such a goody-goody?"

FELIPE placed his hands behind his head, shoved the chair forward a few feet and leaned back in it. He regarded Tim through narrowed eyes which glinted in the dull light of the single fixture overhead.

"This is something which people know about you and your brother," Felipe began. "Sally's father and your father were friends. Seems they came out here together. Your mother died in childbirth. Higgins took Tom in his care and raised him as though he were his own. A man named, Carrol, took you under his wing. He wasn't much and no one knows why he decided to take you as a ward or how come Higgins didn't take *both* of you. Anyways, there's a lapse of about twelve years because Carrol moved off. The next thing people know is that you're back.

"All this time Tom's been raised by Higgins. The old man had this store and Tom went to work for him. You're about eighteen when you come back and you're about as tough and rough a man as anyone'd want to see. You're a gunman, a gambler, and even at your age, a drinker. The first time I saw you was when you came into Silver's Saloon and got into a game. There was a tinhorn playing, and after a couple of hours you and he got into an argument. He said he didn't fight with kids. So you knocked him down and when he got up asked him if he still didn't fight with kids. Silver asked you to leave. You did but came back after going to another place and getting tanked up. The tinhorn was still playing and you and he got into another argument which ended in gunplay. You killed the tinhorn and that was where I came in. I took you to our hide-out. That was also the first time you met Asa Temple. From that time on you were one of us. Yet you weren't. Because you could never take anyone's whipping. And Asa Temple was a tough master. There was one time I thought you and he were going to have it out. But Asa had respect for your draw. What was more the rest of us liked you. . . ."

But Tim had been listening bemused. He had been going over in his mind the possibilities of the masquerade Felipe suggested. It might work out. . . . He moved over to the window and looked out at the street scene below.

The saloons were having a big play. The hitching poles held full complements of horseflesh. Here and there were cars, a few fairly new but most weather-beaten and old. The Higgins store was dark. From his vantage point in a second story window Tim could see over the high fence which bordered the walk side of the store. There were great galvanized tanks on the inside lot, huge coils of fence wire, piles of stake fencing. He also saw for the first time that there was a small residential section at the far end of town and the outlines of a two-story brick building. Lights twinkled from the homes like tiny beacons of respectability in a desert of sin.

"Let's go down," Tim suggested.

"Better take your hardware," Felipe suggested.

"Why?"

"Because Hammer hasn't changed much. Times here are much the same as before the war. Hammer isn't on a main line. And cowmen don't change either. Drink still knocks the sense out of their heads."

But Tim had an idea of the real reason. Temple and his men might still be in town. He took up his jacket with one hand and placed the broad-brimmed hat on his head with the other. His lips twisted in a grin as he said:

"So let's go and if someone bothers us why we'll just knock the sense right back into their heads."

THE old man, the first person Tim had seen on his return to Hammer, was in the lobby, his scrub pail close to his feet. Tim wondered when the man slept because it was obvious he was just about to start work on the inside. There was a bar connected with the hotel; they could hear the sounds of men's voices raised in whiskey shouts as they made for the doors leading to the street. The old man had his mop and pail to one side of the door. As Tim and Felipe swung past Tim had an uncontrollable desire to boot the pail as he came level with it. In fact his right foot went back in the start of a kick. At sight of it the old man burst into a high-pitched giggle.

"No-no," he cackled. "Don' do thet to old Ab. . ."

Tim patted the old man's shoulder and said:

"Just want to hear the tin can roll," he said.

"Hee-hee! It'd go fu'tha than a dead man," the old man said.

"Y'know," Tim said as they clattered down the board walk toward the nearest saloon, "he was the first person I saw and I got the strangest feeling that I knew him and that he knew me."

"Could be," Felipe said. "The old coot has been here as long as I can remember. Always working in the hotel."

They continued their walk in silence. Saloon after saloon was passed. Felipe let Tim take the lead. As though Tim's feet had inexorably led him to the one place they wanted him to go, they found themselves in front of the largest and most elaborate saloon, the only one, in fact, with modern lighting. A sign in the window and one above the door announced it was Silver's and that everyone was welcome.

Of a sudden a feeling of chill possessed Tim. It was a familiar feeling, one he experienced many times and he knew the reason for it. It always came on him in times of danger. Instinctively his hands came low until they were barely above the cold gun butts. He used his shoulders to open the swinging doors.

His eyes slitted against the haze of smoke and his nostrils widened and closed against the sharply acrid odor of raw whiskey and beer which struck them.

Silver's was a deceivingly large place because from the outside it seemed shallow though wide. But it had depth as well as width. The bar was all the way across the room. Felipe and Tim had to pass a number of tables to get to the bar. Every table held a full complement of men all playing one form or another of cards, mostly poker. The bar too was full and three bartenders were at work.

Tim was quick to note the number of guns to be seen. It seemed that every waddy had come loaded for trouble. He and Felipe edged their way to the bar and ordered whiskies. Several of the men to either side gave Tim sharp glances. It was apparent they were trying to place him. But the still-scarred face was an enigma to them.

Tim leaned sideways to the bar and let his eyes roam about. He saw several men moving about the tables. These men were husky, thick-shouldered, with faces which were trademarks of their former professions. One look and anyone could have told these men had been fighters in the ring. Tim was quick to note that they wore no guns, at least on the outside.

He turned back to the bar. Some impulse made his eyes go to the mirror which ran the whole length of the bar. He could see the doors and whoever entered or left. Suddenly the doors swung inward and six men walked in, at their head the man whom Tim had disarmed early in the afternoon. It was Asa Temple.

"Might be trouble, Felipe," Tim said from the side of his mouth.

Felipe shot a look to the mirror and shook his head quickly.

"Maybe. He's got the whole gang with him. Everybody but Yeager."

The voices of the five with Temple were raised in coarse greetings to men they knew as they headed for the bar. It was Josh who first saw Felipe. They had been bound for the oposite end of the bar but when Josh called their attention to Felipe they made for the two men.

FELIPE turned to face them but Tim remained as he was. He could see the face of Temple as the man came close at the head of his gang. It looked sullen and vicious. There was a mean look to the eyes and mouth. Temple was looking for trouble and Felipe was going to be the one to suffer. The six came close. Two of them moved in and one shoved aside the man who had been standing at Felipe's left. But when the second tried to move Tim he got an elbow in his ribs for his pains. He staggered back and regaining his breath plunged forward, this time to meet a hammer blow from Tim's fist. The man staggered back and collapsed at Temple's feet, with blood spouting from a broken nose.

It didn't sem possible that any man could move with such speed as Tim displayed. His hand had barely left the other's face when it and its companion swept down and up again. When they came up the guns were naked and terrible in Tim's fists. Fright showed in every face confronting the two men.

"Come on," Tim taunted. "You're all looking for trouble. Trouble's here. Come and get it."

But it was all too apparent that there weren't going to be any takers. They looked at each other one by one and at last shifted their glances to Temple. A hush fell over the saloon. Men sidled away from the core of men near the center of the bar. Here and there men made their way unobtrusively to the doors and slunk out. Gunfire knew no friends and many had died from bullets going astray.

Asa Temple licked suddenly dry lips. That voice. It was like a voice from the dead. But to whom did it belong, Tom or Tim? There was no clue to be found in the face. His eyes shifted from one to the other of his men but they all seemed as squeamish about going for their guns as he was.

The decision was taken out of his hands.

Before any realized his intent, Tim took matters in his own hands. He took three quick steps forward and slashed downward with his right gun. The barrel caught Temple a slashing blow and ripped the skin from one cheek, knocking him to one side. Before he could recover, Tim was on him again and once again the gun lifted and fell this time against the other cheek.

The instinct of an old-time gun fighter was Tim's. He couldn't possibly have seen the man farthest from him because for one thing he was partly hidden by another and for another thing the man was almost behind him. Yet Tim whirled like a spinning top and blasted with his left gun. A wild scream echoed the sound of the shot and the man who had tried to sneak a shot into Tim's back twisted to one side and fell, still screaming, to the floor. Blood crimsoned as from a fountain from a bullet wound in the shoulder.

But Tim hadn't stopped with the shot. Continuing his spin, Tim came back to his original position, both guns fanning the others. There was no further attempt to get Tim. Felipe, too, had his guns out and there was a look in his eyes also, that told the other Felipe was not too averse to using them.

It remained for Josh to give voice to what was on their minds:

"Tim Hogan! By God! Tim Hogan. . . ."

The result of Josh's cry was unexpected. Felipe took a single look at the suddenly sullen and angry faces of the crowd and edged closer to Tim.

"H'm," he whispered. "Looks like they haven't forgotten. Maybe we'd better get out of here while we still have skin. . . .'

Tim was of the same opinion. The mob was ready for anything. The fact that Tim had shot in self-defense, that Felipe's life had been threatened had no bearing on Tim's presence in town. They were going to avenge Higgins' death.

Tim's guns moved slowly back and forth now menacing the whole crowd.

"The men's room," Felipe said in an undertone. "It's got a window we can get out of. . . ."

"What about horses?" Tim asked as he started to edge toward the door.

"We'll wory about them when we get out. *Let's go!*" The last was a shout of warning. Felipe had seen a couple of those farthest from the immediate scene go for their guns.

It was a fortunate thing for them that the door they were heading for was directly to their left and only a few feet at that. Another ten feet and they would have never got there. As it was the first shots punctured the wood just behind them. It took them but a few seconds to get out the window, Tim leaping headlong through after Felipe. He landed on his hands and continued forward in a somersalt. Felipe gave him a hand and they ran through the pitch darkness toward the rear of another saloon a few yards off. Behind them the sounds of pursuit belled like hounds on the scent.

Felipe was right. There were horses to be had. He and Tim mounted but managed in the few seconds they had to untie the balance of the mounts. Lead whistled about them as they ducked low in the saddles and rode for the hills.

SHERIFF HOGSEND, looking more somber even than usual, walked back toward the partition which separated the Higgins' office from the balance of the store. Sally was sitting at the desk staring into space.

"Well, Sally," he began after clearing his throat.

"Yes, Sheriff?" the girl said without looking up.

"I just stopped in to say we're goin' out for Tim Hogan now," he said.

"Hammer's only war hero," she said in a voice inaudible to the man standing before her. Then in a louder voice, "Don't let them kill him, Sheriff. Please! Let him have a fair trial."

The man bit his lower lip drew his brows together and cleared his throat once more. Hang the girl. Hogan was guilty as hell! And she was fixing to put him in a fine spot. Fine chance he had of gettin' the man in alive. Why that mob out there was primin' for a necktie party. Especially Temple.

"I-I'll do my best Miss Sally," Hogsend said. "But I can't promise."

She sighed and felt a lump rise in her throat. She remembered how Tim looked when last she saw him and what his face was when he came in the day before with Felipe Sapota. She knew then that although her eyes hadn't recognized Tim her heart had, else why had it taken such a leap in her breast as he stepped out the door. She rose and followed the Sheriff to the outside door.

As it opened to let the Sheriff through, the old man who was the porter at the hotel slid in. He waited until Sally turned to him before saying:

"Hee-hee! Fixin' for a hangin' be they? Gonna hang Tom Hogan high's a kite, eh? Good boy, Tom. . . ."

I almost wish it were Tom, Sally said to herself before the words made sense to her. She whirled wide-eyed and pulled the old man around to face her.

"What did you say?" she blazed at him.

"Gonna hang Tom Hogan, ain't they?" he said in bewilderment.

"Tom Hogan! That's Tim they're going after," she cried.

"He come back too?" the old man looked up at her with eyes innocent as a babe's.

"How do you know it's Tom?' she shook him.

"Hee-hee! Tom was allus full of the devil. Never failed to aim a kick at my slop pail . . . allus had to warm him . . . and he allus said the same thing, wanted to see the tin can roll."

"Tim never said that . . .?" her voice was almost a whisper.

"Tim never said nothin'. Only way I could tell 'em apart. Saw 'em both every day, but Tom would come in for a glass of beer right from the store. Used to watch f'r 'im, I did. Allus did the same thing. . . ."

"Ah! Ah! We've got to stop them. They're making a terrible mistake. They're going to hang Tom Hogan, thinking it's Tim. . . ."

"Yeah. That's what I hear. Big necktie party. Asa Temple's a mean man. Allus lookin' f'r to kill someone. Like he killed yore pappy. . . ."

THE words were like a blow between the eyes. What did the old man mean? How did he know about her father's murder? She was almost afraid to ask.

"Shore, Miss Sally," he said to her question. "I was there."

"Then why didn't you say something before?" she demanded.

His answer was simple and to the point:

"No one asked me."

"We've got to stop them," she said again. Turning, she dragged the old man after her and started outside. She became aware of an odd silence. There were several men standing in the doorways of some of the saloons, and a couple of women stood in attitudes which looked prayerful, in the doorway of the single grocery and meat market in town, but with those exceptions not a solitary soul was to be seen.

"Do you know where they've got him cornered?" the girl asked.

"They say he and the other feller's in some shack up along near the Devil's Monument, Miss Sally."

The girl bit her lip. If what the old man said was true, it meant she wouldn't be able to get there with her car. They'd have to ride to head them off. There was a chance, though a small one, that the mob would wait for the Sheriff. . . .

'Come along," she said draging at his arm, "I've got two horses behind the yards. . . ."

"We can't stay here forever, Felipe," Tim said.

Felipe was looking out of the single window the shack possessed. His eyes scanned the lay of the land, tried to figure out the best way to get to Santa Felipe. He kept shaking his head.

"We could go around the Devil's Monument," Felipe said. "But it's risky, and even then we'd have that hellish stretch across the canyon bed. . . ."

"Then I say the hell with it. Let's go back. After all, it's me they want. I didn't kill the old man. They've got to prove I did and they'll have a fight on their hands."

"The way they're feeling," Felipe said judiciously, "I don't think they'll be in the mood for trying you. The nearest cottonwood'll be judge and jury for you."

"Not if I can get to the Sheriff," Tim said.

"I would hate to climb that if," Felipe replied.

Tim slapped a fist into a palm with vicious force. He knew now he had made a mistake running from them at the saloon. Felipe had mentioned the shack and he had fallen in with the other's suggestion to use it through the night. It wasn't till he had awakened that he was told it was Temple's headquarters. Well, perhaps Felipe was right. Santa Felipe was some odd thirty miles away. He could give himself up there and Hogsend could bring him in. . . .

"Okay, Felipe," Tim said. "Let's chance the long road around the Devil's Monument and up the canyon. This place gives me the creeps. It's like being in a rat's cage. Look at the floor."

There were great irregular stains on the flooring. Felipe knew blood had made them. What was more they were quite recent. His quick mind leaped to a conclusion.

"Yeager! He wasn't with them last night. He and Temple must have gotten into an argument and Temple or some of the others killed him. Wonder where they hid the body?"

Tim jerked his thumb in a backward movement. His grin was sardonic and nasty.

"There's enough brush to hide an army below," he said. "All they had to do was dump him."

Felipe shook his head in agreement as he started for his guns and belt slung over the chair, buckled it on carefully and made sure they hung right. Tim had already slung his about his waist. Felipe, done, led the way to where they'd tethered their horses for the night.

They had to ride back to where the narrow shoulder jutted out to hide the shack beyond. From there the excuse for a road forked, one fork leading across and down the side of the butte to Santa Felipe and the other out into the desert where it split up several times into smaller paths which led to the various ranches on the irrigated floor of the desert.

Felipe was in the lead. The path was only wide enough to accommodate a single rider. Tim wondered why his companion paused until he arrived at the other's side. Then he too saw the small cloud of dust approaching, a cloud which evaporated to show the mounted figures of a large number of men.

"Too late, amigo," Felipe said softly. "The law and the noose come riding hand in hand."

"We'll have five minutes start," Tim said. "There's only one thing to do. Down the side of the wall. It's our only chance."

"And over that rocky bed below to . . . where?"

"Escape. That's where. What comes after, we'll plan on. The idea is to get out of here."

FELIPE turned his horse's head and set him at a gallop after Tim. Five minutes wasn't a long time but if they moved quickly it would be almost impossible for the posse to get to them even with rifle fire. There were a thousand nooks and pockets in the wall to take advantage of. But they didn't make it. Felipe's horse, running at a full gallop, stepped into a hole and Felipe was catapulted over its head. Tim, hearing the crash of his friend's fall, pulled his mount up sharply, whirled him in his tracks and sent him on the back trail to where Felipe was sitting on his haunches, shaking himself as a dog does after getting out of the water.

Tim leaped from his horse ran up to Felipe and leaning over, asked:

"Hurt? Think you can make it?"

Felipe arose and grabbed quickly at Tim for suport.

"Ankle . . . damn! I think it's sprained. . . ."

Tim looked toward the cabin a hundred yards away. He had but a single opening now. There was no thought of getting down the treacherous mesa wall. He had to get Felipe to safety. Bending low, Tim used the fireman's grip and hoisted Felipe to his shoulders despite the other's veciferous protests. Tim was spent and soaked with perspiration by the time he reached the cabin.

"We'll have to cut that boot off of you," he said to Felipe.

"Go! Go on," Felipe urged as he tried to pull his leg from the other's grasp. He moaned in pain as he did. Once more he gasped, "Go! I'll be all right. They're after you, not me."

But Tim was paying no attention to the other. He reached into his hip pocket, pulled out a clasp knife and paying not attention to the pain he was causing the other, slit the leather boot with one sure swift stroke. Felipe sighed in relief and wiped the sweat from his brow as the pain was eased. His ankle looked twice its size in the sock.

"Tim," Felipe begged. "Please. Get the hell out of here! Before it's too late. . . ."

But it was too late. There was the unmistakable sound of horses at a gallop coming closer and closer, and then the sound seemed right outside the doors.

Tim unbuckled his belt did the same to Felipe's and threw them both on the threshold. Leaning the other gently against his own squatting body he waited the coming of the posse. They could hear the sounds of men's voices raised in warning, then after a short while a couple of the braver coming closer. Suddenly the sun was blocked out and two men, rifles held ready for instant action, stood in the doorway.

One of them turned and called to the rest. Quickly the cabin was filled with the sound of their voices and heavy clomp of their boots. There was no gentleness as several pulled Tim and Felipe erect.

Asa Temple, his cheeks criss-crossed with court plaster, was in the van of the mob, and beside him were several of his men. He took the lead:

"Let's get it over with, men. Get a couple of pieces of rope long enought to string these killers up and that'll be that."

BUT there were some who wanted to wait for the Sheriff. These, however, proved to be in the minority. It was a matter of seconds and Tim and Felipe, twisted ankle and all were dragged from the cabin. Fists swung and boots kicked at their helpless bodies. There were two cottonwoods not far from the cabin. At sight of the impromptu gallows the crowd broke into boisterous shouts. Temple, striding beside Tim, made sure of a small measure of revenge. He swung his fist against the defenseless man with savage deliberateness, cutting his mouth, mashing his nose, slashing at his cheeks. Not a word, not a sound came from Tim.

Only Felipe cursed in a regular monotonous stream of foul language, all directed to Temple.

Arriving at the cottonwoods, the mob of men bound Tim's and Felipe's hands behind them and sat them astride a pair of horses. Lariats were tossed over two branches brought down and tied around the necks of the helpless pair. An argument arose then. One of the men wanted a hangman's noose to be made.

"Let 'em strangle slowly," Temple said with vicious fury. "That's what they deserve. . . ."

But the other put up an argument. It was only when Josh and two others of Temple's gang boxed him in with their hands on gun butts that the objector changed his mind.

The devil-may-care look was still in Tim's eyes as he turned them toward Felipe in a look of farewell.

"Guess this is it, pal," he said.

The dark eyes of the Mexican were somber but unafraid, as he returned Tim's glance. "Not yet," he said as he caught sight of several horses racing up the path. "The Sheriff!" He shouted the last at the top of his voice.

His shout and the way he bent his head in the direction of the coming party brought the other's attention to it. The only two who seemed unaware of the sheriff's coming was Asa Temple and the man who wanted a hangman's noose. It was he who saved Tim's life. For Temple suddenly dashed forward with the purpose of slapping the horse under Tim on the rump. But he had to pass the other. A leg thrust out made Temple sprawl in the dust. Before he could rise the Sheriff drew up.

"Untie those men!" the Sheriff ordered. He waited a second or two then went on, "That ain't Tim Hogan, that's Tom. And he didn't kill old man Higgins. . . ."

The words brought reason to the mob. They knew Tom couldn't possibly have done the murder because he was in town at the time it was done. Ready hands undid the nooses. And faces flushed in shame turned aside as the two men slipped from the horses.

The Sheriff had forgotten in the excitement that he had another thing to do, arrest Temple. He turned and shouted:

"Get Temple and his men and bring them here. . . ."

But Asa Temple had seen Sally and the old man. He surmised the reason for the old man's being with her. It was too far from the horses. He had a single avenue of escape, the way Felipe and Tom Hogan would have had to take. Surreptitiously, he slid from the rest and made for the cabin. Only Tom saw him slide away.

LIKE a flash Tom leaped after him. As though Temple's senses had become more acute, he turned and ran at the same instant. But Tom was younger, quicker. The gap was closing fast. Then Temple whirled, whipped out his hidden gun and let loose three blasts from it toward Tom. The last staggered Tom, but only for an imperceptible second. Temple turned again, but in the time he had taken for shooting, he lost the race. The last ten feet Tom took a headlong dive, wrapped his arms around the other's legs and brought him down.

Temple was no longer human. He kicked, slugged with the gun barrel at Tom's head and tried to knee the other. But Tom was too close. Though the pistol blows dazed him and the kicks hurt, Tom wouldn't let go. The strong arms went higher and higher. But Temple had a last trick. Bending his head he bit as hard as he could into the bony wrist close to his face. Tom groaned and let go. Temple plowed his elbow into Tom's side, shoved him off, got to his feet and turned to race away. But he had forgotten where they had rolled to. He whirled in the wrong direction.

And that was his fatal error. The split second that it took his brain to realize his position was not enough time for him to react. He knew what was coming but he could do nothing. His fate was foreordained and the end was inevitable.

His screams raised the hair on many a head as he fell sheer for hundreds of feet before hitting against some bushes which sprouted from the side of the mesa. Then two bodies continued the plunge to the bottom, Temple's and Yeager's, for he had landed in the very bush which hid Yeager's body.

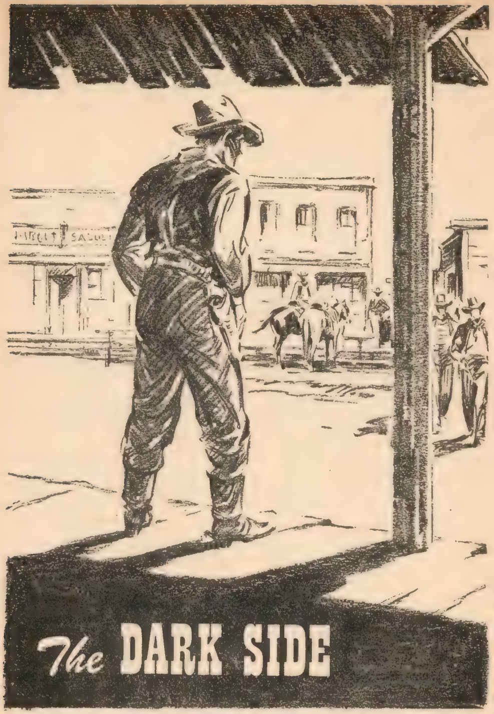
Sally nestled close to Tom Hogan, her head pressed close to his chest.

"But," Tom said, "I thought it was Tim you loved."

"It was Tim I pretended to love, but it was Tom all the time. I knew it when old Ab told me that they had made a mistake. Oh, Tom, when I discovered or thought I discovered it was Tim, I was so frightened. I thought he had come back to keep a promise he made. . . . You came to kill, I thought."

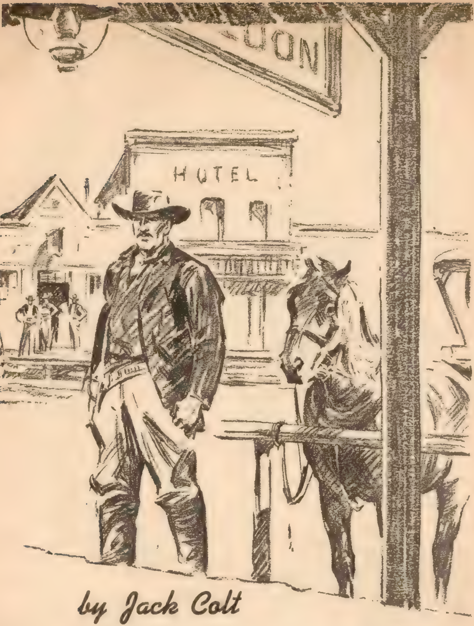
Tom looked over her shoulder. He remembered what the doc had said, that friends and home would help in bringing back memory. Well, perhaps it were better he forgot. Life did not always start at birth, unless it was at the birth of love. . . .

THE END



The DARK SIDE

They faced each other, their hands hovering over their guns . . .



by Jack Colt

A MAN'S life is a street that reaches from the cradle to the grave. He can walk it slowly or he can rush along — but the end is the same!

A MAN'S life is like a street that stretches from his cradle to his grave. He may walk it slowly, or rush down it headlong; the end is the same. But like all streets this one has two sides, one brighter than the other.

On a clear autumn day, when the air was cool and still, Miles Searcy crossed over to the dark side of the street. He didn't know at first that it was darker there. The sun seemed to shine as brightly as on the other side.

Only after a time did Miles learn to see the shadows that were hidden in the light, the shadows that veiled men's eyes and hid their thoughts from him. He was older then, and he understood things. But it was too late.

He would have liked to cross back again, back to the side where men showed their true feelings, where they were friendly and respectful out of friendship and respect, and not because they were afraid. Miles would have liked to go back; but it is a street that allows only one crossing, and that in only one direction. . . . .

* * *

"Sometimes," Ed Teager said, "I wisht I was young again. But mostly I don't."

He was only forty-two, but already his hair was thinning; almost every finger on both his hands had been broken and had healed crooked, and he walked with a slight limp as a result of having a leg broken in a stampede. Among the crew of the Split M he was the oldest, and inclined to philosophize.

"Us older fellows," he continued, "don't have nearly the troubles you young bucks do. Comes the end of the day's work, we can take it easy. We don't have to be scared that if we ain't shined up and in town by seven to do our sparkin' someone will steal our gal."

Miles Searcy lifted his dripping face from the water bucket and towelled it fiercely, then ran the towel over his bare shoulders. His hair was very light; on his face the down was almost invisible. At nineteen, he was not yet shaving more than twice a month.

"You call that trouble?" he said.

The men laughed. They were lined up on the bench outside the bunkhouse, seven of them, enjoying after-supper smokes and the cool of the late summer twilight. Miles was the youngest of the crew and they all liked the husky boy, enjoyed kidding him about his romance, and lent him their best shirts and bandanas when he went to town.

"Out of my way, boys," Miles called. His combed hair, almost soaking wet, was like dark gold as he ran for the bunkhouse. "Don't block the doorway; it's four miles to town and she's waited long enough already. Wear your Stetson, Dan?"

"Wear it," Dan Kiley said. "And when you take it off to kiss her, think of me."

"I ain't got that much imagination, Dan. Her beard is a different color than yours."

He went inside, and through the open doorway they heard him moving about. When he came out five minutes later he was stuffing his shirt into his pants. A flaming red bandana at his throat was the only touch of color between the black shirt and Dan's black hat.

"Is that a bandana you're wearing, or did you cut your throat?" Tom Aikers kidded. It was a standard joke but still drew a laugh.

Miles had to laugh to himself, as he rode toward town. They were a pretty good bunch and it was fun to work with them and kid with them. But he could bet they were more than a little jealous. Girls were scarce in Texas, and girls as pretty as Rose Laine were scarce anywhere.

THINKING of her set his blood running faster. Miles still wondered that Rose should be willing to see him steady. There were other fellows around, older, more assured and with a readier tongue than he. And with better prospects, too. Not that his were so bad, though. He had news to tell her that ought to bring a light to her eyes.

Maybe he hadn't ought to tell her yet. Maybe he was rushing things. But what was the sense in waiting? He'd wasted enough time already, Miles thought, feeling almost as old as Ed Teager. When a girl like Rose let a fellow call on her twice a week through a whole summer she wasn't simply flirting. And Dan had hit it closer than he knew; Rose had let Miles kiss her.

Thinking of that was almost as good as actually having her soft lips pressed against his. And that her tiny, corseted waist should be so yielding to his encircling arm! Miles felt a burning hollowness deep in his stomach.

On the Texas prairie the town was a dark blot with light lines that were streets cutting it into squares. Shafts of yellow light slanted out of windows here and there. On the main street the stores were all shut up for the night, only the saloon stirring to life to make a single exception.

Miles turned off the main street and rode down another that was little more than an alley. The town had grown fast and haphazardly, springing up mainly because it was on one of the minor trials to Abilene when the Kansas Pacific Railroad extended its lines to that point, and it had as yet no real law or government.

Miles dropped rein before a quiet house and walked stiffly to the door. The first few minutes were always the hardest, as he struggled to find words for Rose's father and mother.

The girl was not as pretty as Miles thought, but she had a good figure and vivid coloring and thick hair as black as coal. She never made it easier for him, either; standing so close to Miles as to confuse him further, but not talking at all beyond her first greeting. Sometimes he almost thought she did it deliberately.

Mr. Laine was a harness maker whose hide was as thick as the material he worked with, and all attempts of his wife, subtle or otherwise, to get him into the kitchen and away from the young folks, inevitably were doomed to failure. He sat and chewed over long dead political issues until a decent interval had elapsed and Rose could suggest to Miles that they go for a walk.

Once outdoors again, and walking beside this girl with her shawl that always smelled of some potent perfume, Miles loosened a little; a little, but not much. With the men at the ranch he could joke easily. With a girl his tongue refused to unkink itself. The long silence grew embarrassing.

"I was talking to Ben Younger today," Miles said haltingly. Ben Younger was the owner of the Split M.

"Really?" That wasn't much help either. Why couldn't she act more interested?

"Yeah. We were just talking, you know, and he was telling me how he got his start. Well, anyway, Ben was saying that he thought a young fellow who wanted to work still had a chance to do good for himself."

It was coming easier now. Miles let the words rush out.

"So I told him I'd sort of been thinking about that myself. And Ben said he was happy to hear it, and any time I was ready he'd be glad to sell me heifers at two-fifty a head and give me time to pay; and if I wanted he'd let me herd five hundred head of his own for a share of the calves!"

Miles stopped, temporarily out of breath, and waited for Rose to tell him how wonderful she thought the news was. But she didn't seem to think it was anything to get excited about.

"It sounds nice."

"Nice? Why, with a start like that and any kind of luck I'd have a real spread in five years! And I've already got a place to build all picked out."

THEY had stopped past the edge of town, near a stunted and gnarled tree. Miles waited expectantly. Surely she understood now what he was driving at. But her face remained placid and he felt his own excitement flatten.

"The nights are getting cool," she said, watching him.

"Yeah, I guess summer's over."

Rose pulled her shawl tighter about her shoulders and shivered and moved a little closer to Miles. He felt confused. Maybe he hadn't made it plain enough. He sought for the right words, but Rose spoke before he found them.

"Let's go back."

She acted strange on the way back to her house. There was no conversation, and she kept Miles at a distance. When he tried to move closer, Rose moved too. And when they stood on the porch and he tried to put his arm around her she would not let him.

"Are you going to the dance Saturday night, Miles?"

"What? Oh, sure. Naturally." He let his arm drop. "I'll pick you up early, if I can get away."

"That won't be necessary. I'll see you there."

"What do we want to do that for? Might as well go together."

"I didn't know you wanted to take me."

"Didn't know? Why sure, I want to take you. I was figuring right along—"

"While you were figuring, Yancey Vane asked me."

She left Miles standing there, staring at the blank face of the door that shut behind her. He wanted to call Rose back, but it was too late.

He would rather not have gone to the dance, but there was no way to get out of it. Everybody was expecting him to go. There were raised eyebrows when he made no rush for the water bucket, and when he neglected to shave or ask for the loan of any finery glances were exchanged.

They rode into town in a body, and found that they were among the last to arrive. Horses were strung along the side of the big barn, buckboards stood grouped farther back, and there was a single buggy all by itself. The buggy belonged to Yancey Vane.

Miles watched the big rancher dancing with Rose. Vance was a handsome man, florid and a bit too heavy but a good dancer. He dressed a shade too well, lived apparently above his means, and never missed a poker game at the saloon. Winning or losing seemed to make no difference to him.

Vane was not especially liked, but no one could deny that he had a ready smile and a ready wit. Every so often Miles saw him lean close to Rose and whisper something which brought a laugh to her lips. Once, with her head thrown back and her dark eyes flashing merriment, she saw Miles and waved gaily.

He turned away bitterly. Not that he blamed her. She was just a girl, after all, and it was easy enough for a man like Vane to turn her head with his slick ways, his soft talk, and his buggy with its high-stepping matched colts between the shafts. Rose wasn't the first girl to fall for Vane.

But those thoughts didn't make the evening pass any faster or more pleasantly. Miles kept to himself, not joining the men like Teager who had come only to drink, and yet not willing to leave for fear he might be thought a whipped pup running with his tail between his legs.

After a while someone came up behind Miles and said, "Didn't know you and Rose had a bust-up." It was Dan Kiley.

"We didn't," Miles snapped. His face was cut in straight planes, with a broad nose and solid jaw. Now the jaw jutted forward.

"Forget it," Dan said goodnaturedly. "Forget I said anything. Come on out and have a smoke with me and the fellows."

They went outside and rolled cigarettes and stood around and talked. The talk ran to moth-eaten jokes and commonplace remarks about the weather and cattle and horses. Miles didn't have much to say. He was glad when the dance broke up, and Ed Teager and the rest came out.

By the time they were mounted and ready to go, Rose and Yancey Vane had come out too. They got into Vane's buggy, Rose letting the rancher take her arm. Vane's colts were good; he didn't need the whip to make them prance. The buggy whirled off in a spurt of dust, and when it made the turn onto the road it was not in the direction of Rose's house.

"Smooth as silk, that Yancey," Ed Teager said as they watched the buggy spin away.

"Skip it, Ed," Dan Kiley said quickly.

But Teager had too many drinks under his belt to understand what Dan meant. Besides, there had been other jokes at other times and no offense taken. Teager laughed, held his tongue until they had covered a half mile, and then opened up again.

"Rose still look as pretty to you as she used to, Miles?"

"Any reason why she shouldn't?"

It would have been taken as sour grapes if he said she didn't, Miles knew. He tried to carry it off with a smile. Maybe Ed would let it drop when he saw he wasn't stinging anyone.

"No indeed," Teager laughed. "And didn't she queen it when Yancey waltzed her around? Slickest couple on the floor and she knew it."

"She's just a kid compared to him," Miles said. His face was flushed.

"She didn't seem to think so."

"All right. So what? He comes around with his dude get-up and his smooth talk and he turns her head. That doesn't mean anything."

"Wake up, boy! Rose is only a kid in years. She knows just what she's doing. You couldn't turn her head with a barrel of blasting powder."

Miles hit Teager in the mouth and knocked him from his horse. Before the older man could get up off his knees Miles was on foot beside him and battering at him with both fists. Then the rest of the men piled in and tore them apart.

Teager's face was red along its right side and from the right corner of his mouth there was a trickle of blood. He got up slowly, shaking his head from side to side and wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand. Most of his drunkenness had left him. He looked at Miles, who had gone pale.

"I'm sorry, Ed," the boy said

"So'm I. I should've known better than to rub it in while you were still raw."

"You'll both heal quick enough,"

Kiley said.

There was a laugh at that. Miles and Teager dusted themselves off and climbed back into their saddles. Teager seemed truly to have forgotten the matter. Strangely enough, whatever tension was left in the air came from the other men.

It seemed to Miles that they were watching him. Probably thinking, he said to himself, that he too was only a kid. And that was the way Yancey must figure him too. Otherwise he wouldnt have tried to cut in on him when he was seeing Rose steadily. Well, one thing for sure, there wouldn't be any more jokes.

AND there were no more jokes; in fact no mention of Rose and Yancey at all. Sometimes Miles wished there were. Except for that his relations with the men were normal. Teager bore no grudge; the rest had no reason to harbor one.

But the very fact that the girl's name was taboo made it all the harder for Miles. She was the subject closest to his heart. Had he been able to talk freely to the men he might have taken the edge off his bitterness.

At first he was bitter mostly against himself. He had been rejected because he deserved to be. How did he stack up against a man like Yancey Vane? You couldn't expect a girl like Rose to wait around for a bashful cowpoke.

Or maybe you could. Yancey wasn't offering anything but a good time. Rose ought to know that. For weeks Miles vacillated between anger and pity for the girl. He made no attempt to see her; for that he did not have the heart.

There were times when Miles told himself it was senseless to chew over the same bitter cud, but that didn't help. He did not call on Rose again, but twice he saw her riding in the buggy with Vane. And several times, when the men did not know he was near, Miles heard her name mentioned. In his present mood those things added fuel to the flames.

Those flames rose higher before they subsided, and when that happened there was left a hard core of hatred for Yancey Vane, who was all the things that Miles Searcy was not. With that Miles was left. He had gone through all the stages of hating and there was no other possible end.

Without being aware of it Miles reached the point where all he needed was an excuse that would satisfy himself. Yancey Vane furnished the excuse. Miles rode in from the range late one Saturday afternoon and saw the familiar buggy spinning along the road. Vane had a woman with him, but this time the woman was not Rose.

"What's the matter, Miles?" Ken Bates asked. He was riding beside the boy and had seen his head swivel around.

"Nothing." The buggy had rounded a curve and was out of sight.

But the picture of Yancey Vane and the woman stayed in Searcy's mind. He had said it was nothing, but it was more than he knew. He lay awake that night, not nervous and not tense, and not even conscious of the plan which was forming within him.

Sunday was always a day of rest except during spring and fall roundups, and it was common for a few of the men to ride to town in the afternoon. Miles had not been going in for some weeks, yet he gave it no thought when he found himself shaving and dusting his clothes. His gunbelt hung on a nail over his bunk; Miles took it down and buckled it around his waist.

"What's the hardware for?" Dan Kiley asked.

"Just so," Miles said, his face showing nothing.

"You want some good advice?" That was Ed Teager, Miles thought. Always quick with advice. "Leave the gun here. You ain't sore at anyone."

"Who said I was?"

Teager disregarded that. His crooked fingers were bent as though he wanted to hold Miles back by force.

"Listen, boy. You don't know what you're doing. A gun is an invitation to trouble. Some men will back away from trouble, some won't. Yancey Vane ain't yellow."

"What's he got to do with it?" Miles shouted. He could not have said what made him suddenly so angry. "What're you dragging him in for? He's already got himself another woman."

"And just so you'll know, Rose ain't weeping over it. She's already got another man."

THERE was no sense in arguing back and forth, Miles thought. Teager had some notion in his mind and he wasn't going to let loose. Miles stamped out and saddled his horse. Kiley, Bates, and two others who were riding into town called for him to wait. He waited impatiently.

It was a crisp, clear day, the sunlight strong without burning, and they rode fast. Yet it seemed a long time to Miles before the town rose out of the prairie. Inside himself he was waiting. They clattered down the main street and pulled up before the saloon.

"Aren't you coming in?" Kiley asked.

"Not right now," Miles said.

He had picked a vacant place at the end of the rail and was leaning back, his shoulders hunched high and his elbows spread wide. From where he stood he could see most of the street. A few people were out, most of them walking slowly. Miles Searcy waited.

He saw the puff of dust beyond the edge of town and knew somehow, even before he saw them, that a pair of matched colts were kicking it up. They came into sight, running briskly, and behind them the buggy. Yancy Vane was alone today, but was dressed as though he didn't figure to be alone for long. His heavy gold watch chain glittered in the sun.

Miles pressed heavily against the rail and his back came away. There was no anger in him now, only a very clear and cold purpose. He moved into the center of the street and waited for the buggy. Yancey Vane had to stop or run right over him. Vane stopped.

"Get out," Miles said.

Someone was calling his name. It was Dan Kiley, standing wide eyed in the saloon doorway. Miles heard the sound as from a long way off. He was intent on Vane. The big rancher was stepping down to the street, his own heavy gun bumping against his thigh.

Miles dropped back a few steps. There had to be plenty of space between them so there could be no rushing. No more sounds now, only a heavy stillness that was louder than a scream. And Vane's face, surprise draining the color from it as he saw what was coming. His eyes narrowed to slits beneath the broad brim of his hat.

Miles opened his lips and let a stream of curses pour out. He said the words without emotion, but they were words no man could take. Vane's breath hissed between his teeth. His hand clawed at his gun.

The gun stuck in the holster.

Even so he would have drawn too late. Miles Searcy's first shot caught him high in the chest and lifted him on tiptoe and flung him back. The second shot split his watch chain and turned him so that he fell face downward in the dust of the street.

It was over now, and done with, and Miles was neither sorry nor glad, only very calm and watchful. With the end of the gunfire men came running. Miles watched them. One was Bice Dancer, who ran the gambling in the saloon and who had been friendly with Vane. Dancer slowed to a walk, stopped beside Vane's body. His dark, thin, careful face was a blank slate.

"He was a friend of yours," Miles said.

Dancer knew what Miles meant. If he wanted to take it up, that was his privilege. The gambler squinted at Miles, then looked down at Vane. He reached out a polished boot and shoved Vane over on his back. He reached out a polished boot and shoved Vane over on his back. There was not much blood; the holes hardly showed.

"He was," Dancer said. His inflection said he was speaking of the past. "I've got nothing against you either, Searcy. Buy you a drink?"

WHY he accepted the offer, Miles did not know. Perhaps because it was the first time anyone had addressed him by his surname. In the gambler's tone there was a casual acceptance of Miles Searcy as a man. So when Miles turned from the dead thing that lay in the street his head was held high.

Men stepped aside to let the two pass. If there was anything but respect in their eyes Miles Searcy failed to see it. Dan Kiley was still in the doorway; he would not turn his back as he made room, but neither did he look Miles in the face.

"That must have been pretty good shooting I missed," Dancer said after he ordered the drinks. "Vane was as fast on the draw as most."

"Most aren't very fast."

In his own voice Miles thought he detected a certain crispness. He was not boasting, just speaking the truth. And Dancer's men confirmed that truth.

"Right as rain. I guess you gave him an even break at that. Didn't hear anyone say you drew first. Another drink?"

"Sure. On me, this time."

"Fair enough. Say, I never knew you and Yancey had any trouble. But you must have had your reasons."

"I had my reasons, all right."

Dancer let it drop. Other men drifted around, friends and cronies of the gambler. They had not been unfriendly to Vane, either, but there was a complete acceptance of Miles and no mention of the shooting. They took their cue from Dancer and called him Searcy. There were more drinks poured and drunk.

The whisky had small effect on Miles, except for a curious glow of excitement he noticed in himself. For the most part he said nothing except in answer to respectfully direct questions. He found the time passing in a strangely swift and peaceful way. When at last he turned his back to the bar and leaned on his elbows he saw above the swinging doors a darkening sky.

"Hey, Dan!" he called to Kiley, who was at a table with the others of the Split M. "It's getting late. What do you say we drift?"

"Why sure, Miles, I hadn't noticed. Any time you're ready."

"Ready right now," Miles said, and watched the four rise quickly to their feet. To Dancer he said casually, "Be seeing you."

The gambler's reply was swift and cordial.

"Sure. Any time you're in town, Searcy." He followed Miles a few feet and dropped his hand on the stocky boy's shoulder. His voice was low.

"Stop in. I run a good game. For friends of mine, that is."

Dancer seemed a pretty good sort. Miles thought. Certainly a friendly fellow despite his cold exterior. It was the first time he had spoken more than a brief greeting to the gambler. But you often couldn't tell until you got to know a man. Miles went out with Kiley and the others and they swung into their saddles.

Riding back to the ranch, they spoke seldom. Ken Bates had a new joke he'd picked up and they all laughed at it. If the laughter was strained, Miles did not give it much thought. Sunday was over; they were probably thinking that tomorrow started another round of work.

He couldn't blame them for thinking of that. Certainly the work was not easy, even for a fellow his own age. Miles reminded himself to have another talk with Ben Younger. Years had a way of slipping by; no time like the present to get started. Younger wouldn't feel he was rushing things. After all, Miles told himself, he was a kid no longer.

TRUE, there was nothing so attractive about running a ranch. You put in a lot of hard work building it up; and when and if you built it up you were generally like Younger, pretty quick to run to fat. At any rate, it was better than punching cattle all your life for wages and keep.

Miles took his time about dismounting. The other men were already in the bunkhouse by the time he had dropped his saddle. Instead of following them, Miles walked over to the big house. But only Younger's houseman was at home; the boss, he said, wouldn't be back till later.

Entering the bunkhouse, Miles sensed that the men had all heard of the affair in town. Not that they acted in any way different than usual. If the pinochle game seemed desultory, maybe it was because the cards were running bad.

Nobody brought the matter up at all, not even Ed Teager who might have been expected to have something to say. Miles had hardly expected congratulations, but then hardly censure either. After all, he had to admit, it was nobody's business but his. Yet he wondered. He wondered, but did not fail to fall asleep the moment his head hit the bunk.

And when he awoke in the morning, it was with a relaxed, easy feeling. Miles dressed with the rest, but not as hurriedly as they. Nor did he rush through his breakfast. Maybe the work had to be done, but it was not that attractive.

He was slow getting away from the corral. By the time he caught up with the rest of the crew they were well on their way into the north section. Usually they paired off, sometimes even worked in three's or four's, but it did not seem strange to Miles when Ed Teager asked him to work the brush alone. Nor was it unusual that when Miles rode in from the brush that afternoon Teager and some of the others should have left already.

Miles saw Teager again on the porch of the ranch house, making his report to Younger. It was a fresh reminder to see the boss and have that talk with him.

This time he wouldn't be so nervous. Walking toward the big house, after he had eaten his supper, Miles framed the words he would say in his mind. Younger must have seen him coming; the fleshy rancher was waiting at the door and invited him inside.

"Have a seat," Younger said jovially. His silk shirt stretched taut over his paunch as he himself settled back in an easy chair. "I was hoping to have a talk with you."

Younger tried to keep his manner light but did not succeed. There was a vague uneasiness in his small eyes as he mulled over what he was about to say. But he came right to the point.

"Fact of the matter is, Searcy, that the market on beef is weak. I've got to let someone go. You're the youngest of the crew."

"Is that what you and Ed Teager were talking about? I had a hunch there was something going on with the men."

"Teager? What ever gave you that idea?" Younger came upright in his chair. "Why, you know yourself the men like you."

"It doesn't matter anyway. I was figuring to go in for myself, like we were talking about that time. Might as well do it right now as later. You said you'd help me."

Younger's heavy fingers drummed on the arm of his chair.

"And I will. You know I wouldn't go back on my word. Only, like I was saying, the market is weak. This would be a bad time. You couldn't stand any losses. My advice is to wait until things ease up. See what I mean?"

"I guess so," Miles said, and watched Younger sink back. "In the meantime, I can pick up a job."

"A good man can always get work," Younger smiled. "Of course, when things are bad they're bad all over. But I wasn't figuring to leave you out in the cold. I can use a good man in town; say the word and you've got you a new job."

"In town? What do you need a man in town for?"

"You'd be surprised." Younger laughed shortly. "There's more to running a ranch than you think. Anyway, the job is open if you want it. I'll pay you enough to more than make up your keep. Fair enough?"

"Better than fair, Mr. Younger. It's a deal. What do I have to do?"

"Things will come up. Let me worry about getting my money's worth."

ESTABLISHING himself in town was easy enough. Miles took a room above the saloon and settled down to a new life. It was not a lonely one. The saloon seemed to be headquarters for a group of men who had plenty of time for drinking and gambling, and Miles found himself warmly accepted by them.

Bice Dancer had not lied when he said he ran a good game, for his friends. Miles had never been much for playing cards. But at the gambler's invitation he sat in at a few games and found himself surprisingly lucky. He never won a great deal, but always something.

Sometimes Miles wondered what his job was. Younger dropped in occasionally to ask how he was getting along, sometimes to advise him to keep his ears open for any stray news which might be of value. Cowmen came through town often, and in the course of a poker game they might drop something of interest.

For the most part, Miles was content to let things stand. He had money, friends, and when he walked down the street he was always greeted deferentially. Men such as Phil Cane, the banker, who had never seemed to notice him before, now smiled pleasantly when Miles went by.

Without being conscious of the fact, Miles took to wearing his gun all the time. He had noticed that Dancer was never without his, nor were many of the others who frequented the saloon. It gave Miles a sense of confidence to have it heavy on his thigh, even when playing poker. And he played every evening now.

It was on one of those evenings, while he was at the card table, that Younger came into the saloon. The beefy rancher flicked a smile around, nodded to Miles.

"See you a minute?"

"Sure." Miles pushed back his chair. Younger looked at Dancer and the others around the table and waved Miles back.

"No. It's nothing special. I guess these men are friends of yours. It's about those Missouri people who've nested on my land. I want them out of there. You take a ride over and tell them to get out."

"Why sure. I'll do it right now. They got no right to be there anyway." Miles stuffed his money in his pocket and got to his feet.

"They might not take to the idea," Younger said quickly.

He stared fixedly at Miles, who felt that the eyes of the other men were also on him. He supposed that if he asked, one or two might ride along with him. But he pushed that from his mind.

"Don't you worry, Mr. Younger. I'll tell them so they get the idea."

He slapped his hand against his thigh and Younger smiled and put a hand on his shoulder. The men around the table were laughing as Miles walked out. He felt a warm glow inside himself.

THE Missourian stood in the doorway of the sagging cabin, the lantern light from behind him making him a clear target. Miles was tempted to dispense with arguing; he hardly knew how to begin. The nester had heard his horse and had got the door open before Miles reached the yard.

"Who is it? What do you want?"

He was blocking his own light so that he could not see Miles clearly. When the nester turned sideways to let the light past him, Miles saw he was a young man. His overalls were patched and faded, his shoulders bowed from toil. Miles stayed a good distance away, kept his hand on his gun. The cold gun-butt gave him assurance.

"You get out," he said tonelessly. "Get off Mr. Younger's land."

A young woman was pushing up behind the man in the doorway. She had her hand on her husband's shoulder.

"What's the matter, Jack?" she asked anxiously. The nester swung his arm around and got her behind him.

"You tell Younger this land don't belong to him and I got as much right here as he has," he said harshly.

"Better do like I say." Miles reined up closer. "I'm not here to argue."

The light came over their heads and caught him squarely now. "It's that Searcy," the nester's wife said. She had looked over her husband's shoulder, but now drew her head back in fright. The stooped man tried to act determined and failed. His face was gray in recognition.

"All right," he said quickly. "All right."

"Right away," Miles told him, still in the same dead voice. "You hear me?"

They heard him. And he knew they would be gone as soon as they could get their few belongings together. Miles pulled his horse around and rode back to town. Nothing to it, he thought. Younger could have done it himself, or any man. But if he wanted to pay for jobs like this, he was welcome to.

Younger was still waiting in the saloon. He had taken the seat Miles had vacated, but with the rush of the swinging doors the heavy rancher was on his feet. Dancer and the others looked up.

"Well?" Younger asked. Miles was astonished.

"Well what? I told him you didn't want him there and he should get out."

"Well, is he getting out?"

"Oh sure. Sure. I said I wasn't going to argue. They'll probably be gone by morning."

His voice was calm. What was there to be excited about? Bice Dancer looked up at Miles and licked his lips. The gambler smiled thinly. Younger let out a sudden guffaw and dropped his hand on Miles' shoulder.

"That's fine, Searcy. Here, sit down. I was keeping your seat open. That all right?"

"Sure." Miles sat down. "Anything else you wanted, Mr. Younger?"

"No. That's all. Thanks, Searcy." He went out quickly.

Miles took his money out again and the game resumed as though nothing had disturbed its course. If the others were expecting him to tell them the details of his visit with the nesters they were disappointed. But they asked no questions.

Miles himself gave it no more thought until the next Saturday, when he saw some of the Split M hands in town. Ed Teager was standing across the street from the saloon, rolling a cigarette, when Miles came out. It seemed to Miles that Teager must see him. Apparently not, for Teager was turning away.

Miles called out and the older man turned, his manner affable.

"Hello. I didn't see you coming. Too busy with this smoke I was making, I guess."

MILES thought he sounded a little breathless. Maybe not. They exchanged a few generalities. Miles asked about the other men on the ranch. It didn't seem they got into town as often as they used to. Teager shrugged that off, said they were all right.

"Those nesters gone yet?" Miles asked.

"The other morning," Teager nodded. His eyes were on the ground.

"How come you or one of the other boys didn't tell them to get out before?" Miles wondered.

"Let Younger handle his own dir-." Teager caught himself. "We figured Younger would handle it himself," he finished lamely.

Miles stared at him. Teager was smiling. He hadn't even worn his gun to town, Miles noticed. Sure. Just an ordinary cowpoke. A couple of townspeople passed and Miles caught their eye. They bobbed their heads at him. Teager excused himself and left and Miles went back to the saloon.

Time passed quietly and swiftly, the days washing down an even current of poker games and mild drinking. Younger had few jobs for Miles, but kept him on the payroll. Once there were new nesters; another time Miles rode with Younger to see a neighboring rancher about some dispute. The neighboring rancher came to terms quickly.

When the herds came through town on their way to Abilene there was increased activity. And when the men returned without their herds, and with money in their pockets the saloon thrived. So did Bice Dancer.

Miles would have stayed out of those games with the transient cattlemen, but Dancer insisted that he play. The gambler's long fingers were adroit; Miles won a good deal of money.

He realized that Dancer was cheating, but by then he had benefited much financially and had come to accept the money as a matter of course. After all, he and Dancer were friends. Only once was there any trouble.

It happened after the spring drives. Cowmen drifted back on their way south to their home ranches. At night the saloon was crowded; the round table in the corner dotted with gold coins. Dancer's straight flush beat a full house, but his fingers had not been quite fast enough.

A rangy, thick-handed ranch foreman studied his full house, glared at Dancer, and kicked back his chair suddenly. Dancer's eyes widened, swung swiftly to Miles Searcy. It was Miles who came up to meet the rangy man across the table.

The foreman's glance took in this stocky, emotionless boy, and sweat started on his face. But he had begun his play; he hesitated, then went for his gun.

The hesitation was his undoing. Before the rangy man could get his hand below the table top, there was a gun pointing at his middle. His own hand was arrested; waiting for the bullet, he sagged slightly. Miles hit him across the face with the barrel of the gun and sent him sprawling backward, blood gushing from his cheek.

"Poker will continue," Dancer announced calmly. Men stared at Miles, whose face showed only watchfulness, and licked their lips and left the rancher to drag himself out.

Miles picked up the hand that was dealt him; surveyed the cards. One was the seven of hearts. The pips looked like drops of blood, like those that had dripped over the rancher's hand.

"Up to you," Dancer was saying. Miles looked at him blankly, shook his head to clear it.

"Oh, yeah. Yeah."

Poker continued.

BUT that night Miles Searcy was sleepless. Not nervous; no, he was never nervous, Miles realized. Not for a long time, anyway. Not since a day when he had shoved his back away from a rail and stepped into the street to meet a man in a buggy.

His mind kept drifting back to the rangy man who lay sprawled on the floor with blood running out of his cheek. That was different. He'd had nothing against the fellow. But Bice Dancer was his friend.

You had to prove your friendship once in a while. Or sometimes it was part of your job; although he'd never used his gun for Ben Younger. Miles recalled the time he and Younger had ridden to the meeting with that rancher. The rancher had been big, burly, choleric.

"This is Miles Searcy," Ben Younger had said by way of introduction.

And the rancher's manner had changed. Suddenly he had grown amiable. Sure, he'd heard of Miles Searcy. Happy to meet him. Always wanted to meet him. His square face was a lump of dough.

Like a toil-worn Missouri farmer who had stood in a doorway. Something had made him change his mind about staying on Ben Younger's land, made him change it in an awful hurry. He'd lost color too.

The room was small, the walls lost in darkness but their nearness felt. Faces came out of the dark and Miles Searcy lay and studied them calmly. They were the men around the poker table after he had hit the cowman. Their faces were friendly to Miles, but faintly uncomfortable, faintly watchful.

Why? What were they measuring him for? A six-foot box? Miles grinned into the darkness. Five-seven would be long enough, when the time came. The time wasn't coming though. He grinned again and fell asleep just before the eastern sky lightened.

Another day, another shuffle. That was how Bice Dancer always put it. He had a lot of those sayings. Miles

Searcy found one day little different from the next.

Except that now he too was watchful. He studied men's faces when he met them on the street. The town was still growing; new people coming in all the time. Everybody knew Miles Searcy. He saw them coming toward him as he walked along and saw how their lips curled upward in quick greeting.

But some of the darkness of that night in the room traveled with Miles now. He felt it like an aura around him. It seemed that a faint shadow drifted ahead of him, touched everyone he met. Their voices lifted in friendly salute. Their lips smiled. Did their eyes smile? He couldn't tell.

He studied Bice Dancer. But the gambler's face was always a blank. Anyway, he was friendly. No doubt about that. No doubt? There was always doubt now.

On the outside it didn't show. Miles was sure of that one thing. It didn't even show much inside, just once in a while a sort of frightened feeling. A sort of lonely feeling, it was. Probably because there were so many new faces in town, he thought.

He laughed at the thought as he stepped from the saloon one morning. It was much earlier than he usually got out these days and his head seemed clearer. Still plenty of friends. Bice Dancer, Lenny Dayton, Frank Estelle; all were his friends and companions. And the fellows from the Split M, even though he didn't seem to run into them often any more.

There were others among the so-called respectable element in town. Among others who accorded Miles their respectful nods were Phil Cane, Armind Hines, the storekeeper, Ross Laine, Rose's father.

Miles turned away from the saloon and saw Rose come from her father's shop. He hadn't seen Rose in a long time; she didn't seem to get out much of late, and whenever Miles had seen her she'd been going the other way. He hurried toward her, the gun bumping along his thigh, carrying himself erect.

"Hello, Rose." She whirled, startled.

"Miles! How are you?"

"Fine and dandy, Rose. Haven't seen you in a coon's age, seems like." He wondered at the way she'd lost her color since he'd last seen her.

"I . . . I've been around. We just haven't happened to bump into each other, is all."

"Guess so. Say, what's the matter with you? You're trembling."

"I . . . I must have caught a chill last night."

SHE pulled her shawl tighter about her shoulders and the movement stopped the trembling of her hands. But against the colorful fabric her cheeks showed whiter than before. And her eyes! What the devil was wrong with her?

"What's the matter?" Miles said. "You act like you're scared to death."

"No . . . no . . . of course not. Only . . . couldn't I go now? I really have to be getting home."

Before he could reply she had pulled herself around and was rushing away. Miles was left standing there, his mouth half open. He knew he had hit it right. She was scared, frightened almost to hysteria. And it was Miles Searcy she was afraid of!

He saw it now. Her words didn't mean a thing. The pallor of her face could be caused by other emotions. But once her long lashes had lifted and he had seen the stark fear in her eyes.

Miles Searcy walked in a sort of trance. He had to keep moving. But his mind was not on the street ahead of him. He passed a group of men and they nodded. Their lips smiled. But not their eyes. Their eyes were veiled. They were afraid too, and trying to conceal that fear.

The day was sunny and warm, but somehow it seemed to Miles that his shadow was longer than ever, that it lay ahead of him and all about him like an evil cloak, that it fell on all who crossed his path and hid their eyes from him so that he could not tell what they were thinking. Where he walked the sun did not shine so brightly.

Brakes screeching, the big stage pulled up before the express office in a cloud of dust. Miles came to startled attention, shaken from his revery. Cane, the banker, rushed by and said hello. But he didn't let Miles see his eyes.

Miles watched the door of the stage open. A single passenger alighted, a tall man, limber and easy and with twin six-guns strapped to his thighs. Cane was shaking his hand, greeting him effusively. Miles turned away.

He walked slowly back to the saloon and found Bice Dancer waiting for him. The gambler was up early, but somehow Miles felt no surprise.

"Wondered what happened to you," Dancer said. "Want to see you."

He seemed upset, the first time Miles had ever seen him so. They went to their favorite table. Frank Estelle and Lenny Dayton were already there. So they were up early too! Miles wondered, suddenly realized he did not know what either of the two did for a livelihood. They were both swarthy, thick-shouldered men, looking almost like brothers.

"I need a drink," Estelle grumbled sleepily.

"Save it," Dancer snapped. "There's some bad news just came in on the stage that'll wake you up fast enough. Loren Fenster is in town!"

Estelle pulled his head away from the back of his chair, and Dayton came bolt upright. Miles stared at them. They didn't need a drink now. Fenster must have been the tall man with the two guns. But *who* was Loren Fenster?

"You've never heard of him?" Dancer asked, and read the answer in Searcy's placid expression. "Well, he's the man who cleaned up Prescott, the man who shot down Sam Drewry and his two best gunmen and ran the rest out of Kansas."

Lenny Dayton's thick fingers drummed nervously on the table top. Ordinarily he was not a nervous man.

"You knew he was coming, Dancer?" The gambler shrugged.

"Ben Younger told me he'd heard a rumor that Phil Cane and a couple of the other businessmen had sent for someone. Seems there've been complaints from trail bosses about cattle rustling and crooked gambling, and Cane figures it may cause them to avoid this town and stop its growth. I didn't figure he'd bring in a lawman as tough as Fenster, though."

"The time has come to pull up stakes," Frank Estelle announced.

"You run easy."

They stared at Miles and he knew they didn't like the contempt his words had unveiled. Dancer's eyes narrowed and he was thoughtful.

"I'd hate to leave this town," he said slowly. "And maybe you could outdraw Fenster, Searcy." He put his hand on Miles' shoulder in a gesture of confidence. "But why take a chance?"

"What've you got in mind?" Estelle wanted to know. Dancer's voice sank to a murmur.

"Fenster will want to look around before he does anything. He won't be expecting any trouble before he declares himself. My figure is, he'll spend the day resting and come out around dusk to see what goes on. We'll be ready for him."

"Three of you be enough for a deal like that?" Miles asked sourly.

"You're not afraid to come in on it, are you?" Estelle snapped.

"Don't be a fool, Frank. You know better." Dancer calmed them. "Three of us can handle it. They won't have a chance to pin it on us. And so much the better if Searcy is elsewhere when it happens."

ANOTHER day had been much like this one, Miles remembered. It, too, had been a day of waiting; a clear, still day. He had not been nervous then. Strange that he should be so now, when he was not involved.

He felt himself confined and left the saloon. But out on the street it was no better. People passed and were cordial enough, but his shadow fell across them. For Miles their masks of friendliness had worn thin. Their true faces were always veiled.

He saddled his horse and rode out of town. Better to be alone than with those smiling masks. They would like him even less after Fenster was dead. Miles shrugged. He didn't like the way Dancer had laid things out, but after all Loren Fenster meant nothing to him.

Ben Younger was in town when Miles rode back. The rancher had been in the saloon and was standing at the rail outside when Miles pulled up. They exchanged a few words, studiously avoided mention of Fenster, although each knew what the other was thinking.

"I've been having some trouble with Dave Brewster about strays," Younger said. "Maybe we ought to ride over . . . No, let it wait. A couple of days won't make much difference."

Either way it didn't mean anything to Miles. He watched Younger ride off and then went across the street and leaned against the front of the express office and smoked one cigarette after another. The afternoon passed slowly.

Miles had not eaten since breakfast, but he was not hungry. Twice he changed his position, moving each time to a building further along the street. People went by. He took their greetings and felt the heavy burden of the secret hostility they bore him.

A pleasant day. But not where Miles Searcy stood. Across the street the sun was bright. He knew better than to cross. Where Miles Searcy was the sunlight would always be murky.

Always? Maybe another town, where his name would mean nothing. Maybe even another name. Miles thought about it. It would be good to see another man's eyes clear and unveiled. But there was no use thinking. Another name, another town; but his shadow would always be with him. He could not leave that behind.

There were riders in the street. Miles looked up and was surprised to see that the afternoon was almost gone. The riders were from the Split M; Ed Teager and Dan Kiley had come in to drop something at the express office. They waved to Miles and he waved back.

He would have turned away but he could not let them know he felt the falseness of the gesture. His heart was bitter but he stayed where he was. More riders passed, men from the Brewster ranch, their ox-shouldered foreman in the lead. When Kiley and Teager came out of the express office McHugh, the Brewster foreman, was waiting for them.

MILES saw the fight coming and moved down toward it. Teager and Kiley were turning away, deliberately trying to avoid it. But McHugh would not let it drop. His thick arm shot out, his hand fell on Kiley's shoulder and spun him around. Before Kiley could defend himself, McHugh smashed a mace-like blow to his face. Kiley went down, bleeding. McHugh raised his foot.

By all rights, Miles thought, Ed Teager should have run. He was unarmed, hardly half McHugh's size. He was in for a terrible beating if he tried to defend Kiley.

But Teager wasn't running. He flung himself at the huge McHugh, caught him off balance and drove him with a flurry of punches. Then a fist thudded against Teager's shoulder and spun him like a top. Miles put on a burst of speed.

"Hold it, McHugh!" Searcy's voice was cold as ice.

McHugh caught himself, his arm still raised to smash at Teager, his face contorted with rage. He shifted to face Miles. The arm dropped and McHugh licked his lips. He was wearing a gun, but he was too slow to even consider reaching for it.

Miles and Teager propped Kiley against a wall and wiped bood from his face. He came around fast. They helped him walk a little until he felt better. His lips were puffed and one tooth was broken but otherwise Kiley was in fair shape.

"I guess we can both thank you," Teager said. He and Kiley were in the saddle and Miles walked beside them at the edge of the street. "McHugh would have beaten us to a pulp."

The grizzled puncher was sincere in his gratitude, Miles knew, but still there was something lacking. Miles might have been a stranger. He mulled that over as he turned away from them.

Until then he had not noticed the tall man who stood watching from the other side of the street. Out of the corner of his eye Miles had seen Bice Dancer come from the saloon and cross the street, but he had given it no thought. Now dusk was falling, and a tall man stood in the lengthening shadow of a false-front and watched Miles Searcy.

Miles traded glances with Fenster and knew that the tall man was taking his measure. It didn't matter. What mattered was that Ed Teager had thanked him. A man didn't thank his friend for taking his part in a fight.

No, Dan Kiley wouldn't think of thanking Ed Teager. There was friendship there, and friends took such things for granted. Teager had not even paused to consider his own danger. Kiley would have done the same for him. Once they would both have done as much for Miles. Not now.

Different days, different friends, Miles said to himself. But who were his friends now? Who would risk his life for Miles Searcy? Bice Dancer?

DANCER was on his side of the street, the side in the shadows. But on that side there were no real friends. No man let another look squarely into his eyes. No man ever would. Each had his own shadow.

Once Dancer had had a friend, Yancey Vane. Miles remembered the day he had called Vane down from his buggy and shot him dead, Dancer had been Vane's friend. But Miles remembered how Dancer had turned Vane over with the polished toe of his boot, and how Dancer had buried friend and friendship with two words. And so would he bury Miles Searcy.

Now Bice Dancer and two others like him waited in the shadows to shoot a better man in the back. Miles knew the set-up. Dancer waited between the express office and the next building, Estelle two doors down, and Dayton on the other side next to the saloon.

And a tall, limber man walked unsuspecting toward them, toward his death. Loren Fenster walked easily, head high, with the gait of a man who has nothing to fear, who walks on the right side of the street.

Only seconds now and Fenster would be between them. Miles ran, tugging at his gun. Up ahead the darker shadow that was Bice Dancer slid away from a wall, beyond him Frank Estelle. And behind Fenster was Lenny Dayton. Miles Searcy's shout cut through the twilight hush.

"Fenster!"

Fenster was lightning fast, but Dayton was behind him. Guns spit flame and smoke. Miles shot without aiming, and saw Dayton bent double and knocked from his feet. Fenster's lead cut down Estelle. Bice Dancer was swinging around, yelling in rage and fear. He was not thinking of Fenster now.

Then the roar of four guns rose in fresh crescendo, and when the roar faded into silence Bice Dancer lay dead and the only one on his feet was a tall, limber man who held two smoking guns.

Miles Searcy was on his back on the dusty street, his hands pressed against the warm wet hole Dancer's bullet had made in his chest. There was the rush of feet, the pounding of hoofs in the dust, as men hurried to the scene. Miles heard voices, Ed Teager's and Dan Kiley's among them. Then a strange voice, Fenster's.

"I was a dead one sure, if it hadn't been for this fellow."

"It's Miles. Miles Searcy." That was Ed Teager. Miles felt gentle hands pry his own apart.

"Bad," Teager breathed. "Awful bad." He sounded sorry.

Miles knew how bad it was. He was going fast, feeling the weakness and the darkness come over him. He forced his eyes open and saw Teager's face close to his. He had been right. Teager was sorry. Miles looked into eyes that had no veil before them now.

Then, even with his eyes open, Miles could see no more. Darkness was all around him, enveloping him. But beyond the darkness grew a light that was strong and clear, and Miles Searcy rushed toward it, back toward the right side of the street.

THE END

WESTERN GUNMAN—JOHN WESLEY HARDIN

By MILDRED MURDOCH

Wes Hardin' learned the usual way—the hard way! It's the old "an eye for an eye and . . ."

WES HARDIN—a name that is the all-time symbol of gunplay. Smoothfaced, boyish and handsome, by the time he was eighteen he had eight notches on his gun. He practiced his draw incessantly, and was incredibly quick. So sure of himself was he that he would draw and beat a shot from a cocked gun pointed directly at him. He was a professional gambler, an individualist, with a streak of bulldog daredeviltry that would not be tamed. Such a wild, free spirit as his could find its fullest expression in those years following the Civil War, when Texas was for the most part still lawless frontier.

Wes was fifteen years old in 1869 when he killed his first man, a "bad man." Yankee troops pursued him, and he killed three of them. That was the start, and the men he killed thereafter were too numerous to mention here. He became famous as a devil-may-care youngster, who would fight at the drop of a hat, and whose skill with the six-shooter was little short of magic.

In the spring of 1871 he went with a trail herd to Kansas. In Abilene, hell-roaring shipping point for Texas range cattle, he encountered two men, Ben Thompson and Wild Bill Hickok, who, like himself, were masters of the gunslinging art. Hickok was marshal then, and was friendly enough to the notorious young Texan. Then Wes killed a fellow in an argument, and knew that he had better watch out for Wild Bill.

One night Wes woke up to find a robber in his room. He emptied his six-shooter into the man, who ran out of the room to die, carrying Wes' trousers with him. Just then Wild Bill and several other men galloped up in a hack, having heard the shooting. There was no time to lose. Trouserless, his gun empty, Wes locked his room door, then dropped out of his window onto the top of the hack as it moved away from the front of the house. Then he quietly jumped down and got outside of town, where he hid in a haystack until a cowboy came along. Hardin confiscated the cowboy's horse, gave the fellow a message for Wild Bill, and was off for his herd camp a short distance away. There he grabbed a rifle and when the three man posse arrived tor him, he was ready. He forced them to dismount, remove their boots and their trousers and march back towards Abilene. Thus he got his revenge for the fact that he had had to flee the town without pants.

As soon as the men disappeared, Wes headed back for Texas, to Gonzales County, where he had many relatives. He was always getting into some scrape, which usually ended with a man dead at his hands. He felt justified in each killing, feeling that it was his life or the other man's, and he was always the quicker, the more accurate shot. By his twenty-first birthday, he had killed thirty-nine men.

Hardin soon found Texas too hot for him, with all the murder indictments against him, and he went east, to New Orleans, Florida and Alabama. He operated saloons here and there, and dealt in horses, timber or cattle. He was always gambling, and inevitably, there were shooting frays.

THE Texas Rangers watched Hardin's relatives, hoping for a clue to the whereabouts of the gunman. Following a lead in an intercepted letter, two of the Rangers set out for Polland, Alabama, and they found Hardin on a train, with several companions. The local sheriff, a posse, and the two Rangers made the arrest, taking Hardin completely by surprise, and for once before he could draw his pistol. The officers realized the type of dangerous outlaw with whom they were dealing, and guarded him carefully during the trip back to Texas. All along the way people flocked to the stations for a glimpse of the famous gunman. Most of them were only curious, but some were hostile, and many were sympathetic. Hardin was only twenty-four, handsome, smooth talking, and pleasant mannered.

He was tried for the murder of one Charley Webb. Murder in the first degree could not be charged, for Webb had drawn his gun and wounded Hardin before the latter had fired the fatal shot. The sentence was twenty-five years. But he had killed more than forty men.

Of course a prison term was intolerable to his free nature, and he began at once scheming his escape. Stool pigeons reported every plan. He was beaten, and placed in solitary confinement. Finally, his spirit became subdued, and he gave up trying to escape and decided to study. His father had been a preacher, and Wes studied theology. Then he took up law. Finally, after more than fifteen years in prison, he was released with a full pardon. Prominent men took an interest in him, pointing out that with his intelligence and courage, he had a chance for a good future.

He returned home to Gonzales, and began to practice law. But he was restless, belligerant, too full of strong convictions. He moved about, and finally settled down to practicing law in El Paso. He continued to become involved in fracases of one kind or another, but was calmed down to the extent that he did not draw his deadly Colts when crossed. He strutted and bragged and swaggered his way about instead.

One day in August, 1895, he quarreled with John Selman, a constable, and in the conflict Hardin was shot three times, and died. Opinions differed as to the cause and the course of the argument, and Selman was acquitted of the murder. The reputation and lifelong belligerency of John Wesley Hardin helped to free his killer.

* * *

THE DONKEY ENGINE

by WALTER LATHROP

IF you've ever roamed around the ghost towns of the Far West, you've seen lots of rusty old metal tools, wheel rims and the like, scattered around the towns. If the town was devoted to mining, almost always there is an interesting memento of the times in the vicinity.

That rusty old hunk of iron over there was once a machine—a steam engine—a donkey engine. That pile of scrap metal once did a lot of work. Donkey engines were used a lot. A donkey engine was nothing more than a simple steam engine with a large and capacious boiler that could be fired with any fuel that was handy, from wood to coal.

It usually had a vertical boiler with a heavy flywheel and probably was of about five horsepower when worked at capacity.

The piston was connected to an eccentric crankshaft on which was mounted the flywheel and to which could be connected whatever sort of a load was necessary. Such a load might be a reciprocating pump for exhausting the water from the mine-shaft. Or it might be a drum to which cables were fastened for hauling up loads.

Examples of this sort of engine are still seen in logging camps of the older type. They're general purpose machines that can take an awful beating and still deliver a lot of work.

If anything, the Old West certainly wasn't very highly mechanized, but the machines that were used were pretty rugged. The old donkey steam engines may still be seen in action. They were built so strongly that they seemed never to wear out.

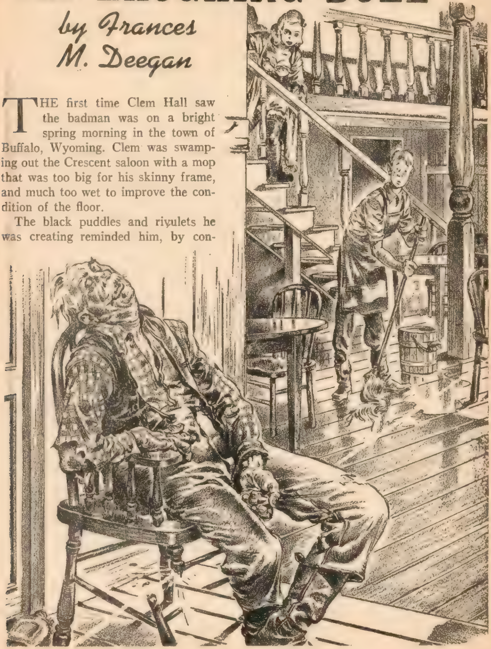
So the next time you pass a pile of scrap iron like that, don't sneer at it; it may have given a lot of service in its time, and like an old soldier, "it's slowly fading away!"

The LAUGHING BULL

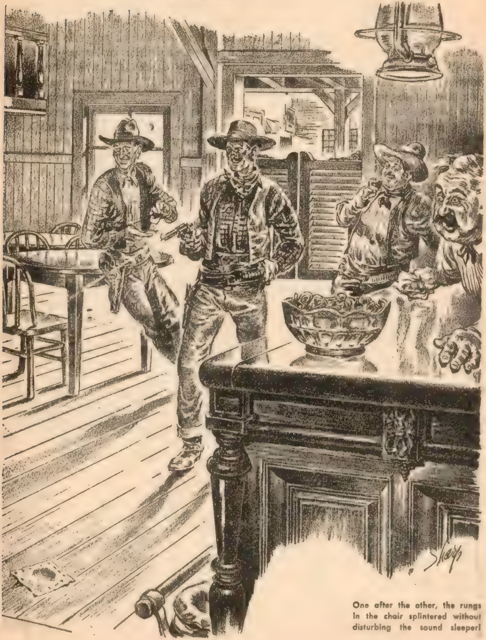
by Frances M. Deegan

THE first time Clem Hall saw the badman was on a bright spring morning in the town of Buffalo, Wyoming. Clem was swamping out the Crescent saloon with a mop that was too big for his skinny frame, and much too wet to improve the condition of the floor.

The black puddles and rivulets he was creating reminded him, by con-



THE BULL liked to horse around a lot – but he wasn't prepared when Clem stood up to him – even after he shot the legs off Paw's chair . . .



One after the other, the rungs in the chair splintered without disturbing the sound sleeper!

trast, of Clear Creek just outside the saloon, and the oddly unpleasant difference between wielding a fish pole and struggling with a mop handle. He leaned on the handle reflectively and considered the many advantages of fishing as an occupation.

"Come on! Come on!" rasped the bartender. "What am I runnin' here, a charity institooshun? Between you an' your old man this floor is worse off now than when you come here. I wish I'd-a never—"

He moved mumbling toward the front end of the bar where Bert Sonder, an early customer, had appeared. His prominent red nose and extended paunch made him look like he was being towed along behind the bar by invisible strings attached to those portions.

Clem glanced at his Pa with an odd expression of reproach and compassion. George Hall was sprawled in a chair tilted back against the wall, completely oblivious to the world and its miseries. His mouth hung open, emitting musical sounds in rhythmic repetition. He wasn't likely to come to until afternoon.

Clem soused the greasy mop in the bucket and slopped it out on the floor again. Pa had been like that ever since Ma died three years back. It seemed like a long time ago to Clem, but looked like Pa wasn't ever going to get over it. If Pa lost this job, in spite of Clem's efforts to do the work whenever Pa was sleeping it off, they'd never get another one in this town. They'd have to take to wandering again.

Three riders pulled up outside and came in laughing and swaggering. The fellow in the lead was jaunty as a cock rooster with his sombrero tilted over his left eye. He had a short red mustache and bushy red hair, but he wasn't too jaunty to let his bright blue eyes sweep the room with an alert glance. The glance paused at George Hall, and an impish grin spread on the windburned face. The next instant there was a six-shooter in his hand and Clem's cry was drowned in the roaring explosions.

One after another the rungs in the chair splintered without disturbing the sleeper. Then the tips of the back legs disintegrated and the whole inert mass settled suddenly to the floor. George Hall's loose mouth closed and opened several times and then the rhythmic snoring went on smoothly.

The gunman's two companions were pounding each other and guffawing fit to split as he reloaded and sauntered to the bar.

"Let's have the best!" he shouted, laughing. "Nothin' but the best for—"

The corner of his eye caught the movement as Clem lifted the soggy mop.

"Hey, hey!" His arm flashed and the mop handle stung Clem's hands as lead chopped it off short, and he was left holding nothing but the stub.

"Now, what's your trouble, Bub?" The crinkled blue eyes were laughing at Clem.

Emotion choked the boy's throat. "If I was bigger," he sobbed through his teeth, "I'd go fer you—you big bully!"

The smile came off suddenly and the blue eyes turned round and glassy. "You mean that?"

"Clem!" howled the bartender. "What the hell's the matter with you? Get busy with that mop—" He realized that was the wrong thing to suggest. "Get the hell outa here!"

The two staring at each other paid no attention to him.

"Yeah, I mean it! He's my Pa, an' I got a right—" Clem's voice cracked and he gasped for breath.

"Hold it! My mistake, pardner." The quick blue eyes took in the collapsed drunk, the mop and bucket and puddled floor, and the skinny fourteen-year-old charged with impotent fury. "How'd I know he was your Pa? Here, will this make it right with you?"

HE PULLED a twenty-dollar gold piece out of his pocket and extended it. Clem fought down the sobs that kept charging up and exploding in his ears and looked up suspiciously. The red face wasn't grinning now and the blue eyes were round and expressionless.

"I'm willin' to pay for the damage. Go ahead and take a couple weeks off. Go fishin'."

That struck a responsive note and Clem reached a grimy paw and closed his fingers around the shiny coin. He started toward his Pa and a hand gripped his shoulder and swung him toward the door.

"Don't bother him now. He ain't hurt. Leave him like he is. That's the best way, see?"

It was the best way. Clem could see that all right. Long as Pa didn't know what happened, he needn't feel bad about it. Clem went out into the clear bright sunshine thoughtfully. He knew exactly what he was going to do with the twenty-dollar gold piece. He was going to buy a horse.

He leaned on the hitchrack and looked over the three nags tied there with the interest of a prospective buyer. Actually what he looked at was their expensive trappings. "Nothing but the best," the fellow had said in the saloon. He meant what he said, all right. Nobody but a big owner, or maybe a high paid foreman, could afford saddles like these. Clem rubbed his thumb back and forth on the twenty-dollar gold piece and his brown eyes narrowed in concentration. Once a fellow had a horse, looked like he might work up to the price of a good saddle. He snapped erect and marched down the street to Felder's livery stable.

Old man Felder was surprised when Clem told him he'd come for Nellie. He tried to back down on the deal.

"Say, listen," he said, "you didn't take me serious, did you? I was just talkin'. I never had no idea you'd get the price— Where'd you get the money?"

"A fellow give it to me."

"Give it to you! Twenty dollars? You expect me to believe that? Why you little sneak-thief—"

"He's right" said a voice from the door. It was Bert Sonder, the early morning customer of the Crescent. "You know who it was? You know who's in the Crescent right now?"

Felder's jaw dropped. "You don't mean—"

"Yep. Bull Callahan himself. You shoulda seen this little snot stand up to him for shootin' the legs out from under his old man's chair. Bull apologized an' give him the double eagle to square it."

Clem gulped and stared at the double eagle in his hand. Bull Callahan! The boss of the Wild Bunch, the Hole-in-the-Wall Gang. The most dangerous outlaws in the country. They not only stole cattle and horses, they robbed banks and held up trains . . .

"If it was me, I'd let him have her," Bert Sonder was saying. "Looks like the Bull taken a fancy to the kid, an' you never know about him. He's feelin' pretty playful this morning."

"Get myself in Dutch all around," muttered Felder. "That fellow said he'd be back."

"It's over a month now, and he ain't back yet. Likely he ain't comin' back.

And there's no law says you got to keep on feedin' the mare."

"No-o, there ain't. And besides she's — Still, I don't know if I could let her go for that money."

"You said I could have her for twenty dollars," declared Clem indignantly, "because she's lame."

CLEM rode Nellie out of the stable bareback, and they went fishing far up the creek. Five weeks later she presented him with Nicky, a shiny, black colt, full of the old Nick. Clem hadn't been so happy for years. Because Pa seemed to straighten up there for a while. When Clem returned to the shed back of the saloon where they slept, he found a gaunt, hollow-eyed man staring at him in terror. The matted hair and beard quivered with his inward shaking, and he was sober.

"Oh, it's you," Pa said faintly, and fell back on the bunk.

It wasn't until months later that Clem found out what had happened to Pa that afternoon. That was after Pa started drinking again and Hogan, the bartender, told Clem there was only one man could sober Pa up. And that was Bull Callahan. His methods were rugged, but they got results—for a while.

Little by little Pa got back at the stuff again. Nobody knew how he did it, but he got it some way, although Hogan and everybody else swore they never gave him any. By the time fall came around, Pa was worse than ever and Clem took on the swamping job again, in addition to the job he and Nellie had, dragging logs down from the hills.

Clem didn't see Bull Callahan in Buffalo again, although there was a cattle detective came around, asking questions. His name was Nolde, and he was the neatest little man Clem ever seen, but he didn't like him. It was right after he showed up that Pa started drinking again.

Nolde tried to make out maybe Clem was friendly with the outlaw. He pretended he wanted Clem to deliver a message to Callahan, thinking maybe Clem could lead him to Callahan unawares. But he soon got over that notion and drifted up the line.

The snow came early that year and Pa was taken down with a bad cold. Next he had fever, and two days after that he was dead. Clem grieved some, but mostly he felt sick and sorry about how lost Pa had been after Ma went. He made up his mind he wouldn't get that way himself, and moved Nicky and Nellie into the shed with him. Hogan never said anything about him going or staying, so he stayed.

Clem was sixteen when he went in with Harley Morgan. Morgan had a small spread down in the valley of the Middle Fork of the Powder River. He needed help, but he couldn't get any one else to go in with him. For one thing, his homestead was on range claimed by Frank Hays, one of the big owners, whose hands were not inclined to cooperate with homesteaders. For another, it was too close to the Hole-in-the-Wall country, that robbers' rendezvous where all the badmen in the West were supposed to meet in regular session to legislate and plan future violence.

To Clem, these considerations were merely vague clouds on the horizon. In order to become a cattle man, he would willingly have joined forces with the spirit of a departed Indian. Besides he wanted a home for his three horses, Nellie and Nicky and Nuisance. The shed was getting a little crowded and the feed bill was something scandalous. They went to the Loopy-Y and settled down to trouble.

Morgan was a lean, sour individual who seemed to resent cows, horses and people with equal bitterness. He took up a homestead because he couldn't work for anybody else. He couldn't get along with anybody. Clem never argued with him, he just learned to do everything six different ways. Because no matter how he did, Morgan always found fault. But Clem had acquired tolerance, living with Pa, and he had to admit Morgan had pretty good reasons for his chronic grouch.

EVERY once in a while somebody used one of their cows for target practice. One night they heard a dull thud back in the hills. When they finally located the cause, they found all the cows herded into a barren pocket and the pass dynamited so they couldn't get out. It was impossible to blast it open without damaging the cows, so they had to build a trail over the rocks with the cows bawling their heads off the whole time.

Next six prankish cows apparently climbed the fence and got into the timothy field. The fence was intact, but the cows were inside looking smug with their bellies full, and the field was a total loss. Then one night somebody cut across the Loopy-Y with thirty or forty horses, slashing fences as they went, and Clem's tolerance for man and beast began to feel a slight strain.

"Ain't you gonna do nothin' about it?" he demanded.

Morgan just looked at him with sour contempt, and it made Clem so mad he yanked Nick's head around and started to follow the horse tracks. They came out on the road that led up the Middle Fork into the narrow red canyon which was the Hole-in-the-Wall.

"I mighta known," he told Nick angrily, "It was them damn horse thieves!"

Nick flattened his ears and hit the road at a gallop, headed for the canyon. He acted like he was as mad as Clem.

The noise of their passage set up clattering echoes in the silence of the sheer canyon walls and they came out into a green valley with tracks leading off in all directions, and cattle grazing in the meadows. They took the broadest trail which went across to a hill slope on the western rim.

There was a long, weather-beaten cabin there surrounded by scrub pine, and a corral off to the left with twelve or fifteen horses. The place was very still when Clem got down and hitched the reins over a broken pine bough.

A lanky, sun-bronzed fellow ambled through the door, wiping his mouth on a red bandanna, His gray eyes were flat and impersonal. His six-shooter had a huge ivory handle.

"Yeah?" he drawled disinterestedly.

"I wanta see Bull Callahan."

"Yeah?"

"Tell him I'm here."

"Why? You know him?"

"Sure I know him. I'm Clem Hall from the Crescent saloon up in Buffalo."

"Oh, that fellow. You lookin' for trouble again?"

"I reckon I'll talk to Bull Callahan about it."

"Well, seein' it's you— I wouldn't talk too rough though. It might hurt his feelin's."

Clem stamped into the house and looked at the five men still seated around the pine table where they had just eaten. They returned his gaze with varying degrees of solemnity.

"Well, well!" shouted Bull Callahan. "Look who's here! How's the kid?"

"I guess you remember me all

right," said Clem tightly.

"Sure thing. How's your Pa?"

"He's dead. You musta heard about it. And you musta heard how I went in partners with Harley Morgan on the Loopy-Y."

"Why, no. I been away for a spell. I ain't caught up on the local news yet. How you makin' out?"

"After the way you fellows been cuttin' up and ridin' rough-shod over the place, it's a wonder I got anything left to make out with—"

"Whoa, there, pardner. Pull up! Them's fightin' words!"

"If I had me two or three good hands, I'd clean out the whole bunch of you. I got a right to protect my prop'ty. I just come to tell you you gotta stay off my place from now on. I had just about all I can take."

CALLAHAN took a deep, ecstatic breath and slammed a heavy palm on the board. He looked around the table and said, "It beats you, don't it?"

A fat, swarthy man at the end of the table pushed his plate back with his folded arms. "He don't know what he's talkin' about. Look at him. He ain't even got a gun on him."

"That's probably why they let him through," said Callahan. "Did you know that, kid?" Did you know there's a couple of sentries posted in the canyon with orders to shoot anybody that's got no business in here?"

"I got business all right. Slashed fences. And when they're my fences, it's my business."

"Somebody cut your fences?"

Clem looked his exasperation. "You fellows went through my place last night with thirty or forty horses and cut every danged fence all the way across."

Callahan looked at the swarthy man and breathed, "Hays?"

"Who else? It wouldn't be the first time."

"Looks like somebody's trying to drive you out, kid," said Callahan lightly. "And it wouldn't be anybody from here. What would I want with your little two-bit spread? What else they done to you? Sit down and tell me about it." He flung back his red head and bellowed: "Horny! Bring another plate!"

The next thing he knew, Clem was telling them about it. They were a good audience, too, all except the fellow at the window who was watching the cows through a telescope.

The swarthy man, whose name was Josey, shook his head. "And they get away with it," he grumbled enviously.

"Maybe," said Callahan musingly. "Listen, kid, this time you're the one owes me an apology, for accusing me of something I didn't do. How you gonna square it?"

Clem swallowed a hunk of steak. It felt like it went down the wrong pipe.

"Well, I—I ain't got much, except horses. That's what I done with that double eagle you give me. I bought me a mare, and seems like she foals just about—"

"Much obliged. I'll drop around when I get time and pick one out. Meantime you better ride up to Buffalo and talk to the sheriff about your troubles. I'd go right away—tonight, before anything else happens."

"Uh-huh," Clem agreed. He wondered why Morgan hadn't thought of that.

"El Paso will ride out with you," Callahan continued, "to keep you out of trouble, and I wouldn't come back here again, if I was you. I'm gonna give them two sentries hell for lettin' you in this time. They don't do it again. Oh—and that reminds me. Long as you're goin' in to see the sheriff tonight anyway, you can save one of us a ride."

He slapped a thick sealed envelope beside his plate. "These letters are important, kid. And the sheriff is gonna be damn glad to get 'em. You be sure and deliver 'em into his hands personal. See?"

Clem took the envelope and stuffed it inside his shirt. It was a little confusing. Just why the outlaws should be corresponding with the sheriff wasn't clear, but he had long been aware that the law business had ramifications which he didn't understand. During the cattle wars, for instance, the sheriff and small cattle men had held the town of Buffalo with the help of rustlers, against the big owners and their imported gunmen.

"Well, much obliged to you," he said awkwardly. "I'll be goin' now."

WHEN he went out El Paso, the lean, sunbronzed fellow, was riding up from the corral on a mean looking white horse with pink rimmed eyes. Somebody inside must have told a joke. As they went down the trail they were followed by gusts of husky laughter.

Clem stopped at the Loopy-Y to change horses and scrawl a note for his partner. Likely Morgan would be sore as a scalded cat about Clem riding off and leaving him alone with the job of rounding up strays and mending fences. But he was bound to be sore anyway and if Clem managed to do some good with the sheriff, maybe that would fix things.

He put the saddle on Nellie, although she was awful spoiled and slow. He thought maybe Bull Callahan might take a notion to drop around and pick out a horse while he was gone. He hated to part with any of them, but he just had to keep Nellie. He thought more of her than anybody.

It was night when Nellie trotted into the main street of Buffalo, but there was a lamp burning in Sheriff Nugent's office. The sheriff was there with Bert Sonder, who was now a deputy. Both men scowled at him when they saw who it was.

"Well, what's on your mind?" growled the sheriff, using both hands to lift one fat leg over the other. "Better make it fast, 'cause I'm expectin' an important message."

Clem told him. "And I want you to talk to Hays about it. I ain't gonna stand for no more—"

"Hays?" What makes you think he's responsible?"

"I know right well he is. At first I thought it was the Hole-in-the-Wall gang, but I went to see Bull Callahan this morning, and he convinced me—"

"You what? What kinda game you tryin' to pull on me? You'd never live to tell it if you ever got through the Hole-in-the-Wall! And I know for a fact Bull Callahan is ridin' south. I got two men trailin' him right this minute!"

"I guess you might maybe be mistaken. I saw Bull Callahan with my eyes back in the Hole-in-the-Wall, and he give me this to deliver to you." Clem pawed inside his shirt and brought out the bulky envelope.

Bert Sonder took it and the sheriff snatched it out of his hands and ripped it open. There was a folded sheet of foolscap and several smaller envelopes with cancelled postage stamps. The sheriff spread the foolscap and read it, at first with snorts of disbelief, and then with increasingly vehement mutters. When he got to the letters in the small envelopes, his fat fingers shook and his big face seemed to swell and get redder and redder. Both Bert Sonders and Clem were alarmed, but he ignored them and read on, muttering and barking short phrases that made no sense to them.

"Sonder!" he roared when he slammed down the last letter. "Get that sneakin' little—get Nolde! And get him here quick! Go on, get out of here! What are you waitin' for?"

Sonder ducked out the door and the sheriff stamped up and down his office, waving his arms and muttering fearful oaths, and paying no attention whatever to Clem.

THE deputy returned in haste with the neat little cattle detective who had once accused Clem of being a friend of Bull Callahan. Nolde pranced into the office looking expectant.

"Well, sheriff, you got the word, eh?" he tittered delightedly. "When do we start?"

"We don't!"

Nolde looked shocked. His pointed little face turned from Sonder to the sheriff like a fox scenting danger. "What? What happened? What's the—"

"As I understand it," said the sheriff heavily, "you got information that Callahan and the chief members of his gang was ridin' south to rendezvous with a bunch of rustlers at some unknown spot where they was holdin' a bunch of cattle. They had it all fixed to sell the cattle at a way station, and split the profits."

"Th-that's right."

"So you an' me was gonna play it smart an' round up the whole bunch where they had the cattle hid, soon as we knowed where that was at."

"What — what?" breathed Nolde faintly.

"This happened!" Nugent snatched up the foolscap and shook it in Nolde's face. "I got a letter from Bull Callahan tellin' me the inside story—how you made a deal with him to share the profits on stolen horses and cattle that you tipped him off to steal! How you was gonna fool me into thinkin' we could trail him, and ketch him with his pants down! Only we wasn't gonna ketch him. I could be ridin' from now until—"

"Callahan!" screeched the little man. "You certainly don't believe what he tells you!"

"I believe it." Nugent blinked like a sleepy bear. "Because I got proof. I know them two fellows you had me deputize was gonna hold the trail just long enough to make it look good. And then they was gonna camp for a while and send back word they'd located the hidden cattle, so's to start me out on a wild goose chase to nowhere—"

"You're crazy!" howled Nolde. "Why would I do a fool thing like that?"

Nugent looked suddenly at Clem, and pointed a fat finger. "That's why! So the big owners could clean out the homesteaders and nesters while I and my posse was off chasin' spooks. Them two men you had me deputize was reps. One from the Hays outfit and one from Corly's You was playin' all angles. You wasn't missin' a bet—you thought! You know what happened to your two smart reps? Bull Callahan knew they was followin' him, and when they quit, he come back to see what happened to 'em. He was just stringin' you along anyhow. He never had no intention of payin' off to you. Them reps talked—"

"He's lying! He killed 'em, and now—"

"Nope, he never killed 'em. He left 'em with nothin' but a horse blanket apiece, and sent word to the sheriff at Cheyenne to go and get 'em and hold 'em for me. I reckon they're in custody right now. Them—and you. Because I got the letters you wrote to them two reps, giving 'em their instructions, and tellin' how you was gonna fool me. I'm 'fat, lazy chump,' am I? You think I'm a 'windbag with no guts,' do you? Why, you double-crossin' little slicker—"

It was slick enough the way Nolde drew and fired point blank while both Nugent and Sonder had their hands on their guns. The sheriff stumbled back and slumped ponderously against his desk.

"Don't try any smart business, Sonder!" Nolde warned tautly. His pointed face was gray and his black eyes glittered as he centered the gun on the bewildered deputy. "I'm taking that horse outside, and if you make any sign before I'm out of sight, you're a goner—"

Without a sound Clem dove headlong and caught the little man above the knees as he was about to take a backward step. Jarred off balance, he crashed and the gun exploded toward the ceiling. Sonder fell on him then and wrenched the gun out of his slim hand.

IT WAS late in the morning and Clem was still heavy eyed when he put the saddle on Nellie next day. Seemed like they were making a hell of a fuss about his stopping that crooked cattle detective. They kept him up till all hours telling over and over how he rode into the Hole-in-the-Wall and rode out again with the proof of Nolde's crookedness. What they couldn't understand was why he jumped Nolde there in the sheriff's office.

He kept telling them, "I wasn't gonna stand by and let him take my horse. He'd killed her sure as shucks. And besides, I never liked him anyway."

But they weren't satisfied with that. They wanted to make a hero out of him. Seemed like the sheriff ought to be the hero. He was the one got plugged, but Doc said he was doing all right. Said the fat was thick enough to protect a couple men.

Clem led Nellie down the alley back of the livery stable and looked both ways before he mounted and took off down a side lane. He was already late getting back to the Loopy?Y and Morgan would be fit to be tied. He shook his head and settled in the saddle for the long ride.

"Come on, Nellie. You ain't gonna do no pokin' this morning. How'd you like it if that Nolde had been whalin' the tar outa you all night long? Giddup, you old bag o' feed! I'm gonna ketch hell as it is."

Morgan sure would give it to him all right. He'd gone off and left things in an awful mess. Still, he guessed old Hays would think twice before he pulled any more of his devilment. Looked like Clem had a few friends he could call on if need be. He could face up to old Hays and tell him where to head in. He guessed maybe he would, just to let the old man know how things stood . . .

* * *

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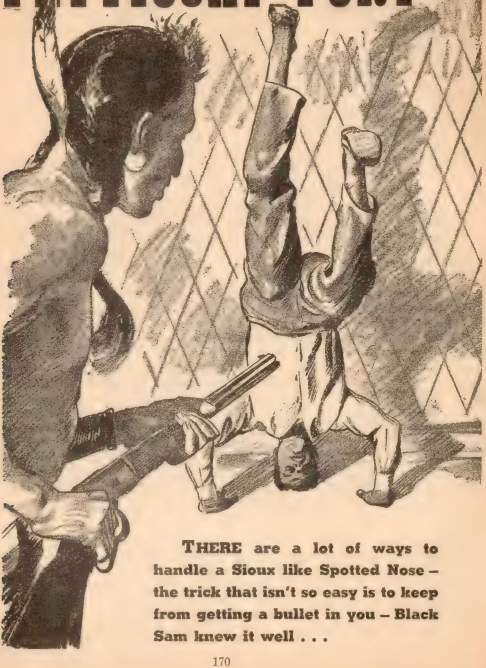
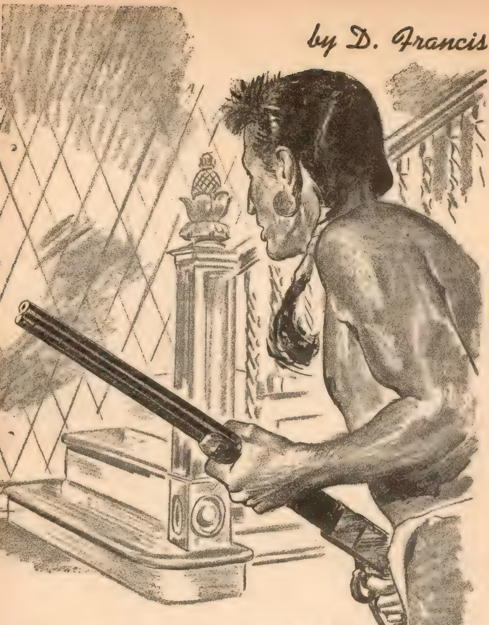


THERE are a lot of ways to handle a Sioux like Spotted Nose – the trick that isn't so easy is to keep from getting a bullet in you – Black Sam knew it well . . .

by D. Francis



JOHN BUXTON was a greenhorn from Ohio State when he made his first trip up the Big Muddy and turned off on Bellyful Creek to Fort Standstill.

This was the trading post Crouse and Langer had built, and named after they had whipped a band of marauding Sioux to a standstill. They had one good season and then the American Fur Company came along and built a bigger fort across the river and took all the trade.

Greenhorn or not, any man with eyes could see Fort Phillippe rearing up side of the Missouri, and it wouldn't take much sense to figure it would be a losing proposition trying to buck the American Fur Company. Nevertheless Buxton let Crouse and Langer unload their dead duck on him for a good price. And then he went back downriver as he had come—in the pirogue of that sly *voyageur,* Antoine Mercier, presumably to get his supplies and trade goods. What he came back with was enough to make seasoned traders and trappers weep.

It went without saying that Turnadel Buxton was a determined woman. Otherwise she wouldn't have married crazy John Buxton and gone with him to a remote trading post in the wild Indian country, where no other white woman had dared think of going. But her outrageous disregard of the unwritten law of the Territory was soon explained. A few of the more curious inhabitants of Fort Philippe had dropped around casually to look her over. They came back with the report that she was even crazier than her husband.

There she was a thousand miles from the nearest settlement, setting up housekeeping with real furniture and china dishes. That was what John Buxton had brought back with him—along with his white lady wife; a big, black nigger servant named Sam; and a half-breed with a crippled arm. The half-breed was called Broken Wing, and he didn't look like he was much good for anything, but he was supposed to be the official interpreter for Fort Standstill.

It wasn't long before the post was renamed Petticoat Fort. And buckskin visitors from the A.F.C. outfit became more and more frequent that winter as each visit resulted in a fresh story of the remarkable insanity at the Buxton place. It got so there was quite a contest going on to see who could bring back the funniest account of the day's doings among the treacherous teacups and tanglefoot rugs.

Of course, all these visitors couldn't just go there and stand around gawking, so they made out like they came over to help John with whatever loony business he was up to at the time. That was how Turnadel got her house remodeled the way she wanted it, with stair-steps going up. And that, of course, was the craziest notion of all. Big Josh Peters spoke his mind about that when he told John:

"If you got to build somethin', you'd do a sight better tightenin' up that stockade, 'stead of pilin' one room on top of another, like you was buildin' on a measly town lot, without hardly room to spit. You got no use for a big two-room house here anyway."

"She wants it that way," John said, and there was no kind of argument to put up against that. When a man is that gone on a woman, then nothing else makes any sense to him, and it is useless to try to get him to see things sensibly.

So all that winter the ungentle employees of the American Fur Company spent a good deal of their time across the river, building stair-steps and a second story bedroom for Turnadel to put her four-posted bed in. There was a good deal of ribald comment and speculation about that fofuraw upstairs bed after they got back to Fort Philippe. And at least one expedition set out with the fixed intention of bringing back bear meat for Petticoat Fort. Any hunter can testify to the Indian doctrine that bear meat is powerful medicine for a married man. The Buxtons got bear meat, and they got buffalo steaks and antelope and deer, because that was a mild winter and the hunters at Fort Philippe were unusually industrious that year.

McPHAIL, the Scoth *bourgeois,* commented on it dryly. "It beats all where you buggers are findin' all this fresh meat," he said. "When other winters you won't none of you stir your stumps because game is so scarce it ain't worth your time goin' after it. It's all very well, keepin' them loony Buxtons for pets when you got nothin' better to do. But how are they goin' to be fixed when the season opens up, and there's nobody got time to look after 'em? All you're doin' is fattening them up for the first scalping party come along."

That point was beginning to worry all of the rough funsters. Their cruel joke had turned around and bit them. Inevitably they had become fond of their innocent victims. Imperceptibly their concern for the welfare of the fantastic Buxtons, and happy-go-lucky black Sam, and crippled Broken Wing had become a fixed habit. Toward the end of winter their crude funning had taken on a melancholy tinge. And more than one shaggy ruffian came across the frozen yellow Missouri with a clumsy, hand-wrought gift for Turnadel, and stared morosely at her rich brown hair while presenting it.

Big Josh Peters tried to talk to John about it. He explained how the Sioux were unpredictable as the weather, and likely to turn cantankerous over the silliest kind of a notion. A Sioux might come up to a man and offer him friendship with one hand, and split his belly with the other. A Sioux would have no respect for a white squaw. Especially with drink in him. He'd go right ahead and . . .

"I don't aim to give them any whiskey," John said, frowning darkly. "It's against the law, and anyway I don't believe in it. It's bad for them."

"How in the name of seven hells you gonna trade with Injuns without you give 'em whiskey?" bellowed Big Josh. "What the blisterin' blank blank you think you're out here for anyways? Maybe you come out west to pick some wild flowers, or ketch you a hummin' bird!"

"No," said John gravely. "I aim to trade just what the law allows, beads and blankets, salt and sugar, knives and kettles. Useful goods."

"Where's it at?" asked Josh, looking around the snug house.

"In Saint Louis," replied John complacently.

Josh looked at him for a while, and then he began to get mad. He sputtered through several irrelevant details, and then he said: "You're here an' your trade goods is down in Saint Louis, an' God only knows where this Teetotal tribe of Injuns is you think you're gonna do business with. Would you kindly explain how you aim to get all them parts together in one spot to do your tradin'!"

"Why, the goods will get here the same way I did," said John simply. "That's why I sent the pirogue back as soon as we unloaded—"

"You mean to tell me you trusted them tricky Creole rivermen to bring your trade goods all this way an' hand 'em over to you?"

"I think Antoine Mercier is trustworthy," said John. "He was the one that found this post for me. And I've offered him a share in the business if we can make a go of it. I reckon we can. He's one of the best boatmen on the river, and he's a shrewd business man, too."

"He's all of that, an' then some!" growled Josh. "He'd diddle his own shadder, happen he could find the way of it. More'n likely he already made himself a nice profit off'n you. Collectin' a fee from Crouse an' Langer for the sale, an' chargin' you for the hire of his pirogue, when all the time he knowed this was about the unsafest place a man could pick."

"I don't see why it should be any more unsafe for me than it is for the rest of you over the river," said John stubbornly. "I can't see any reason why the Indians would want to attack me here; but even if they did, they wouldn't hardly risk it with the big fort so nearby."

JOSH swore in his beard, and said: "I wisht I could learn you different, but seems like you ain't never gonna learn, till it's too late. I ain't sayin' it could happen here, but it has happened other places when the Company didn't want no competition from outsiders. Seems like the Injuns just up an' wiped out the competition, and nobody to blame for it after it was over an' done."

"I get along all right with the Indians," said John. "I give them presents, tobacco and beads and such. And when they come back in the spring with their furs, I'll treat 'em square. And the Company ain't mad at me either. We seem to get along right good together."

"Not yet the Company ain't mad at you," growled Big Josh bitterly. "They been laughin' too hard to git mad. An' all the Injuns you seen so far been tame buggers lookin' fer a handout. But don't fergit that Spotted Nose an' his band is still sore over the lickin' they took here from Crouse an' Langer. Won't make no difference who's occupyin' the premises, long as they wipe out their shame, an' the fort along with it."

"If they come," said John vaguely, "I'll see if I can't talk to them. They might—"

Big Josh loosed a bellow like a rutting bull buffalo, and consigned John Buxton and all his heirs and assigns to the most obscene section of the hot place. Then he went back to Fort Philippe and got liquored up and bashed Link Horner's head in and cracked three ribs for Stew Galen.

Because of the mild winter the Big Muddy did not act up quite so wild when the ice rumbled and broke up with loud explosions, and moved trees and rocks around and changed the banks to suit its fancy. It seemed like even the weather and the river had turned whimsical since the advent of the Buxtons.

The early spring promised a long and profitable season for traders and trappers, and it was not long until word traveled overland to Fort Philippe that Antoine Mercier had indeed started upriver from Saint Louis with a load of goods for Petticoat Fort. Whether he intended to arrive with the load intact was another matter. Certainly he would have no trouble disposing of the goods along the way, and reporting the accidental loss of his cargo.

But John Buxton went blithely along, building shelves for the storage of his goods; and Turnadel washed her bed sheets and petticoats and other frivolous doo-dads, and strung them across the middle of the stockade to flutter and kick in the wind.

This queer ritual so fascinated three tame Sioux who came nosing around that they stayed all day, squatting in the courtyard and observing the ballon antics of the white squaw's wind-catchers. They were rewarded at the end of the day when Black Sam carefully gathered up all the captive wind and carried it into the lodge to be used in some mysterious fashion in the white squaw's medicine maneuvers.

Thus the fame of Petticoat Fort spread and grew among the white men and red, until the day John Buxton got word that Mercier had brought the laden pirogue to within twelve miles of the mouth of Bellyfull Creek, and there had stuck on a sandbar. Mercier had sent one of his hired hunters with the message.

"He could make it all right enough," said the man disgustedly, "if them Creole dogs would get out an' push. But he figgers now he's this close, you'll be willin' to come down with a team o' hosses an' do the work for 'em. If it was me, I'd just let 'em set there."

But John was incapable of such tactics, especially with his whole stock of goods involved. With the grumbling hunter to guide them, he and Broken Wing set out with all four of the horses he had acquired from the Sioux.

HE KISSED Turnabel good-bye and promised to be back for in time for supper, and went out leaving the gate wide open as usual. When he looked back he thought the flag looked fine, streaming in the wind atop the second story of the house. It made everything seem all right.

It was less than two hours later when Spotted Nose and five of his friends came snooping around. Whatever their original purpose was, they did not approach the fort as if they had come to pay a friendly call. They left their horses in a gully half a mile up the creek, and furthermore they wore paint and feathers and carried three guns which were not discharged when they came in view of the stockade, to indicate peaceful intentions.

Instead they glided through the brush on all fours and lay on their bellies watching the silent post for quite a long while, inching closer one at a time. Of course, Spotted Nose and his fellow braves had no reason to love the little fort, having been whipped by it once. And all this may have been no more than natural caution on their part.

Finally they got close enough to peek through the cracks of the stockade, and still they saw nothing but empty sheds, and a tall narrow house with the flag snapping overhead and thin smoke from a stone chimney which the wind promptly swallowed. That was all—except the open gate.

That, of course, explained the silence. It meant everybody had gone out of the little fort and it was standing there empty for the time being. Spotted Nose marshalled his forces and they walked boldly in through the gate and straight across to the tall house and opened the door.

Turnadel looked up from her knitting and smiled, and black Sam quit turning the handle of the coffee grinder and beamed at them expansively.

Spotted Nose and his untamed friends had heard about the strange white squaw of the new trader, and about the huge Sam who was black as a bull buffalo and equally strong; but they had never until now believed any of the things they had heard. For the moment they were too startled to move, but they looked fierce enough standing there with their war paint on and carrying all their fighting paraphernalia.

"I wonder what they want?" said Turnadel curiously. "They don't look the same as the other ones who came, do they?"

"No, ma'am, they do not!" said black Sam, who was beginning to remember certain things the trappers had told him. "They ain't got their hands out for no 'baccy, 'cause they already got their hands full of other things."

"Why, Sam, you don't mean—"

"Yes, ma'am! That's just what I do mean. Don't you go gettin' scared now, Mis' Turnadel. I'll see can I maybe interest 'em in somethin' else."

Black Sam lifted himself up on his toes and stretched his powerful arms over his head and took a deep breath, and then he began to sing a hymn deep and mournful. He had a strong, mellow voice and he made the words roll out with only a little quavering on the high notes.

The braves were impressed with the mighty sound of it, but they were still tense and wary, watching for a trick. Sam sang only one verse and chorus of the mournful hymn, and then he went right on into a livelier one and began to shuffle his feet in a little dance. He quit singing the religious words and started singing words to Turnadel:

"Soon as—you git a little chancet—you slip upstairs an' haul down de flag! You find you a sheet—or other piece o' goods— an' you hoist dat up an' then let 'er fly! That signal the big fort that somethin' gone amiss—an' they come a-runnin' to fin' out what!"

TURNADEL put down her knitting and got up out of her rocking chair. She looked at Sam who was jigging up and down and rolling his eyes; and she looked at the strange Indians standing so still inside the open door. There was no expression on their weirdly painted faces, but the wild, animal smell of them was strong with danger. Her knees went weak and her heart beat up into her throat. Her eyes blurred and then Sam's gibberish turned into words again and steadied her.

"Get ready now—for when I say *'go!'* I'm gonna take one flip an' dance on my han's!"

Turnadel felt the sharp tingle of readiness run through her like a shock. It was like a wild game of tag and she had no thought of the hazards, with all of her concentrated on winning the game. She had no time to realize that just getting upstairs was not enough to win this game—

"Get set on your mark!" sang Sam. "An' now—GO!"

She fairly skimmed over the floor and flew up the stairsteps light as an antelope.

The instant she moved the Indians jerked up their weapons, but nothing happened. Spotted Nose and his braves were paralyzed with astonishment as she floated up through the roof and vanished.

Black Sam flipped himself right side up and stared at the spellbound warriors with their guns and arrows still trained on the stairsteps. Suddenly he remembered a Sioux word he had learned.

"Ha-ye!" he said, which was an odd choice because it meant "Many thanks!"

It seemed to make sense to the braves, however, because it broke the spell. They lowered their weapons and looked at him and then back at the stairsteps. They talked it over with short grunts and growling sounds, and seemed to be no longer concerned about Sam when he was unable to answer the words they gave him.

Finally Spotted Nose handed his gun to Stinking Weed, and lifted his war bow off his shoulder for Yellow Horse to hold. He paced solemnly to the foot of the stairsteps and looked up and then down. Next he leaned over and placed his palm on the third step and brought it down cautiously to the second step and the first. That seemed to satisfy him and he straightened up and walked backward for three paces.

Suddenly he leaped in the air with a wild whoop and dashed at the stairs. His madly running feet hit the bottom step and he fell flat on his face with a bone-shattering crash.

Nobody moved and after a little bit he picked himself up and backed away from the stairsteps.

There was another consultation and Little Gut divested himself of his weapons and went through the same solemn inspection, but he did not back up afterwards. Instead he made high kneed running steps in place, speeding his feet faster and faster until he let out a blood curdling scream and lifted himself by sheer momentum to the third step where his feet tangled and brought him bouncing back down again.

After the third consultation they separated and looked at black Sam, who had remained where he was, bewildered by the savage antics, but praying quietly for time to get their friends from the big fort across the river.

With eloquent sign language they made him understand that they wanted him to tackle the stairsteps. Same was beginning to get the idea. He was not too far removed from the African jungle to comprehend that stair-steps might baffle the primitive nature. Furthermore he was a natural born showman.

If he could keep these wild buggers interested in the stairsteps long enough, there would be time for help to arrive. He marched over and placed himself square in front of the stairs and flexed his muscles and started to sing.

HE TOLD Mis' Turnadel to stay where she was at, and not be scared at the noise, because he'd got them interested in a game, trying to see who could fall downstairs the hardest. And somebody was sure to come along pretty quick and chase them all out.

Then he bowed three times to the stairsteps and went all the way back to the middle of the room. He shook his shoulders and wiggled his hips and danced his feet and lit out for the stairs on a run, bellowing at the top of his voice.

He nearly outdid himself on that first try. His feet slapped the steps in double-quick time up to the fourth step where his big body turned a half flip and he sat down hard and cracked his head and came down fast, bumpety-bumpety bump! He sat there with a ludicrous expression of surprise fixed on his face.

Spotted Nose made a crowing noise and went into a fit of whooping laughter and all the rest joined in. Pretty soon black Sam was whooping and hollering right along with them.

After that it was really a game. A brutal, punishing game full of howls and yelps and wild laughing as one after another tried to hurl himself up the stairsteps, tangled his legs, and came down in crashing defeat. Then they tried it all together and came down harder than ever so that the house trembled under the gigantic thud. But it was hardest of all on Little Gut because he was on the bottom, and his spirit left him for quite a long time and saw visions which he afterwards related at the meetings of the Crazy Dog Society. They dragged him out of the way and went on with the game. . . .

It was near dusk when John Buxton came back along the river. He was wet and muddy and tired clear through to his bones, but he was satisfied too. Behind him there was singing, carried upriver on the wind as the boatmen swung and dipped their oars, nearing the end of their long journey.

He let his tired horse plod along, watching for the first glimpse of the flag over the tree tops. Suddenly he shouted, dug in his heels and drove the horse forward at a gallop over the rough ground. His two companions watched him go with astonishment until they, too, reached the same point and saw what he had seen. Fluttering and dancing from the flagpole, it was unmistakable, even in the dusk—a white ruffled petticoat!

As John galloped recklessly through the gate he noted vaguely that there was a camp fire at one side with several battered braves hunched behind it in the shelter of an open shed. Then the house door was flung open and Josh Peters yelled at him. He fell off his horse and stumbled into the big room, which seemed to be full of buckskin visitors.

Turnadel was dishing up boiled meat from the iron kettle hung in the fireplace.

"My lands! Look at you!" she scolded. "And late for your supper, too!"

Instead of looking at himself, John looked at black Sam who was redding up the table where the visitors had already eaten. Sam was grinning like a fool, but he looked like he'd met up with a grizzly bear. His shirt and britches were raggedy and stained with sweat and blood, and he moved like he had a misery in his bones. John looked around at the grinning faces, and said:

"What's that danged petticoat doing, atop the flagpole!"

Turnadel dropped the ladle into the kettle and gasped, "My conscience! I forgot all about it!" And she blushed even redder than the fire flush.

"Best leave it like that," said Big Josh seriously. "Them Injuns think it's heap big medicine." He nodded at Turnadel. "They figger Little White Wind here gets her power from Grandfather Wind with her wind-catchers."

JOHN looked around wildly and saw the splintered handrail and the solid log newel post leaning tipsily.

"You all been boozing!" he cried angrily.

"Nary a drop!" said Josh. "An' you best keep your shirt tail down. Any damage done around here, it's your fault—wanderin' off an' leavin' the place wide open like you done! I damn' near drownded, gettin' across that spring flood in a leaky bull boat after we seen the petticoat flyin'! You can be thankful you still got a post left—not to mention your wife an' black Sam!"

"What—" gulped John. "What happened?"

"Spotted Nose an' his braves come lookin' fer trouble. That's what happened!"

"And you—you—"

"We nothin'!" snorted Josh. "Time we got here, wan't nothin' left to do. They'd already knocked theirselves silly, tryin' to fly upstairs like they seen Mis' Turnadel do. Spotted Nose is waitin' out there now to make peace smoke with the husband of Little White Wind."

It was quite a conclave by the time Mercier and his river rats had got there. If there was any boozing, it was done on the sly and nobody got tanked up enough to start the bloody brawl that always marked the meeting of mountain men and river rogues. That came much later when they had all repaired to the big fort where they could do their drinking and bragging out in the open.

There was one ticklish moment though, when Big Josh confronted the bright eyed Mercier and asked him point blank what the what he thought he was doing, acting like Honest Jack and delivering a full bill of goods to Petticoat Fort, when everybody knew he was bound to pull some crooked business out of his hat. And it wasn't right, diddling a poor innocent like John Buxton.

But Mercier only flashed his wicked grin, and said: "My friend, you make the beeg mistake. I, Antoine Mercier, wish to make partners with this poor innocent. I have seen many men work and fight all their lives to get a leetle money, which they maybe keep, but mostly not. I have also known of those rare ones who do not need to work or fight, but which the money come to them anyhow. Such a one is this John Buxton, yes. I have recognize this for a long time now. Everything he do, it is wrong. And yet, everything he do, it turn into money. Me, I will not again find such a fool of fortune. I make partners with this one, you bet!"

Spotted Nose seemed to have the same idea. In the waiting time he had had time to cool off, and the more he thought about it, the more daring his own feats became, and he knew that in the Winter Count this year would be chronicled as the Year that Spotted Nose Played with the Wind. And he made up quite a fancy oration lauding the white brother who had brought his white medicine squaw to the land of the Sioux.

"Spotted Nose is a brave warrior," he declared. "And his friends are brave warriors with many honor counts, who stand high in the councils of the Sioux Nation. Our word will be believed. We have seen with our own eyes the power of Little White Wind. We know that she makes little black moccasins out of the wind and they carry her swiftly in any direction. We have felt the hand of the wind which threw us down when we tried to follow Little White Wind. And we have seen what the wind medicine has done for Singing Buffalo. Making his muscles swell with power and his voice sound like the mighty wind in winter. . . ."

HE SAID a lot more, but the gist of it was that he would tell his friends they would do well to take their business to the little fort where Grandfather Wind made himself at home in the lodge of the white medicine squaw.

His friends found out he was right, too. Because that year, instead of getting rid of all their furs and winding up with nothing but a terrible hangover, they went first to the little fort where John was astonishingly generous about handing out his trade goods. Not to be out-done, they let him have their best furs in exchange for the things they needed. Then they took what they had left and went across to the big fort where they wound up with the same hangover they always got, except that this time they went home rich with the things they got from the husband of Little White Wind.

Of course, McPhail couldn't let that go on, and there was only one way to stop it. The American Fur Company had to buy out John Buxton, who not only didn't want to sell, but now had the wily Mercier for his partner. Between the two of them they made the American Fur Company pay a small fortune just to get rid of them, because of course, the Company had no use for Petticoat Fort.

Thus it was that after one fabulous season John loaded his good and chattels on one of Antoine Mercier's pirogues, of which he now had three, and went back downriver.

The inhabitants of Fort Philippe watched him go with mixed sorrow and joy. Somebody said, "Wonder where the damn' fool will go next?"

"I ast him that," said Big Josh Peters. "Said Mis' Turnadel had a hankerin' to see Californy, now the Mexican War is won. Seems like the Gov'ment is encouragin' settlers to go out, an' it wouldn't surprise me none if John struck it rich out there, one way or another."

Which was a pretty fair prediction, considering the year was '47 and everybody knows what happened in California in '49 . . .

PLEDGED TO KILL

By MAC MAURY

JOAQUIN MURIETA made a pledge to his dead brother to kill the twenty men who had murdered him, and then to devote the rest of his life to killing Americans. How well he succeeded in carrying out that bitter vow makes a somber blot on the thrilling pages of California history in gold rush days. Murieta managed to carry on his banditry for more than four years, before his deeds caught up with him and he met his own end at the hands of a company of rangers who were pursuing him. In those few years he attained a dark fame throughout southern California, and every settled community knew and feared him.

At nineteen, the young man's future looked bright and promising. He was a Mexican, of the better class, wealthy, educated, handsome and gay. But he came to California and settled down with his bride—and ran head on into the large amount of race prejudice engendered by the Mexican War. The climax to a series of persecutions came when he saw his brother unjustly accused of horse stealing and then hanged, after which he himelf was beaten unmercifully. He quietly disappeared from his job as a monte-dealer, and made his pledge at his brother's open grave.

One after another the members of that lynching party were found murdered, until fear, even panic, seized those who remained. Fifteen, and possibly two or three more, of the original twenty, are known to have been the victims of Joaquin.

It was the spring of 1850. Among the eager throughs seeking gold in California that year, there were plenty of outlaws, including several Mexican leaders of bandits, seasoned robbers and murderers who gained rich pickings from miners, pack trains, stage coaches and ranches. With relentless purpose, that of leaving the whole state a smoking shambles of horror, the youngster went about organizing these bands of lawless men under himself as leader. For a while he travelled quietly throughout the state, gathering recruits, establishing alliances, hunting out the best fields for plunder. Then the bands began to strike.

By the time one year was over it was generally well known that these bandits worked under one chief, and Murieta had become sure enough of himself to let the communities known that he was responsible for the outrages which were being perpetrated throughout the land. He boldly mixed with crowds in dance halls and gambling houses, acquiring information about travelers and plunder, so that he could direct the raids of his lieutenants.

FOR one bad period they worked the Sacramento valley, making a practice of ambushing travellers, who were robbed and killed. The number of such murders grew appallingly. The sheriff devoted all his time to hunting down the criminals, and on one occasion he and a posse were ambushed, and the sheriff himself was badly wounded. Some weeks later, while still recovering, the sheriff received a message from Murieta that it was he in person who had shot the sheriff. Thus did the young Mexican publicize his activities.

One young deputy sheriff named Wilson made it his sole purpose to hunt down the famous bandit. Unlike most of the citizens, who through fear spoke of Murieta only in secret, Wilson spoke loudly and openly in public places of the necessity of putting a halt to the terror which was sweeping the country. He began to get the people interested in forming a posse to track the chief to his death. One day he was thus talking on a street to a group of men, when a horseman reined in, leaned over and whispered in the deputy's ear. Sudenly Wilson's hand moved to his gun; but as sudenly he fell forward and there was the sharp report of a pistol. The rider whirled and was gone, and saw to it in the next few days that the rumors were confirmed that it was indeed Joaquin Murieta who had murdered the man who was bold enough to talk of cornering him.

Wilson's death roused men more than even his words had done. Two companies of militia were organized by General Bean, and were preparing an expedition against the bandits, when the General himself was captured and killed by the outlaws.

Then Texan Captain Harry Love took up the manhunt, and at the beginning he did his tracking alone. He was soon responsible for the death of a few of the leaders. But the robberies and wanton murders continued, until the State of California offered a five thousand dollar reward for Joaquin Murieta, dead or alive. Handbills announcing this reward were posted in the towns. In Stockton one day, a crowd had gathered around the flagpole in the public square, reading and discussing this notice. A handsomely dressed Mexican rode up to the group, then dismounted and wrote a few words at the bottom of the handbill. Then he casually rode away. The onlookers watched him curiously, then crowded around the flagpole to see what the stranger had added to the notice. They were electrified to read the words, "And I will pay ten thousand dollars. Joaquin Murieta." But by this time the brazen outlaw had disappeared.

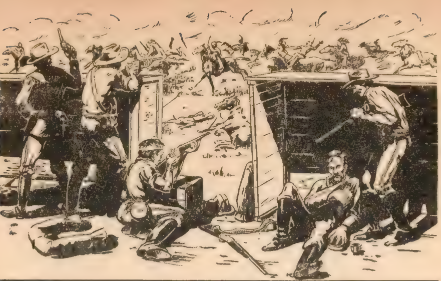
One day Murieta was riding alone when he came upon a party of twenty-five miners camped at the head of a canyon. The place had steep walls on three sides, and only one outlet, a narrow trail along the cliff far above a tumultous river. The men did not recognize the famous bandit, who spoke to them of Murieta, as he appraised the wealth they carried.

The miners decided to track him down the next morning. They soon discovered that he had joined about fourteen others of his band, and struck off toward high country. The miners continued to follow the trail, and at night camped in a forest. Here the bandits suddenly attacked them, felling fifteen men in the first volley, seven in the next. From this massacre, Murieta and his company profited to the extent of thirty thousand dollars in gold dust, and forty horses.

THE three survivors told their story, and the towns all turned into armed camps. Warfare against the bandits was carried on fiercely. Then Captain Harry Love discovered the rendezvous, the place where preparations for the bandits' Plan were being carried on. With a company of twenty picked rangers he surrounded the valley.

Murieta was washing his horse at the time. His saddle and gun lay ten to fifteen yards away from him. Half a dozen other bandits lay in the sunshine or worked about the fire. The rangers approached at a dead run, and before he realized what was happening, Murieta was cut off from his weapons. Suddenly, however, he sprang upon his horse's back, leaning forward to escape the shower of bullets which followed him. Rangers pursued him, their guns speaking continuously. Once Murieta urged his horse to make a leap over a twenty-foot cliff.

But the rangers were close behind, and the horse fell dead from her wounds. The rangers aimed their rifles carefully at the man as he started to run. But he turned and raised his hand. "Shoot no more," he said, "your work is finished." He sank to the ground near his dead horse. It was no trick. Murieta was dead.



REVENGE!

By FRANCES YERXA

Even the wily Sioux occasionally bit off more than they could chew—at Wagon Box!

AT FORT Kearney, Nebraska, occurred two of the most terrible battles in frontier history. It was 1866, and the marauding Indians were the terror of the pioneer caravans following the Overland Trail to the West. Fort Kearney was established by the army to protect the travelers. It was a resting place and a haven for making repairs, and was also a stage coach stop, and a pony express relay.

The soldiers stationed there kept the Indians away by the mere fact of being there, armed and authoritative. They came to believe that the Indian menace was not so bad as painted. Jim Bridger, famous guide of the region, kept warning them of the danger. He told them there were Indian spies everywhere, and that the savages were just waiting their chance. The officers ignored him, or laughed at him.

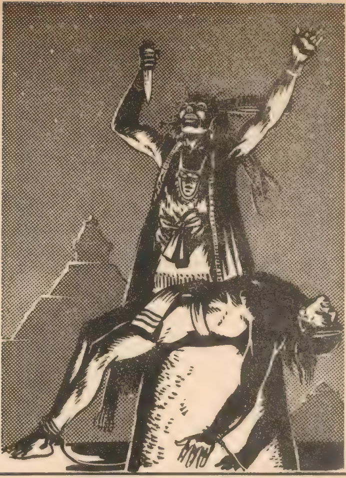
Then on December 21, 1866, came the Indians' chance. Two of them had gone to the Fort that morning, on some errand or other. Their real purpose was to spy on the soldiers. They found out that Colonel Fetterman, with eighty men, had gone out to protect a mule train, and that the soldiers were not properly equipped. Away from the Fort, the group of soldiers would be no match for the Indians. They were clumsy riders and slow shooters compared to the Indians, who could duck and zigzag, firing guns or shooting arrows while going at breakneck speed. The Indians had learned the use of mirrors to flash code signals. Evidently, these two spies semaphored their chief, Red Cloud. He prepared an ambush.

Some distance from the Fort, a bunch of shouting Sioux rushed the troopers. Then, feigning retreat, they disappeared over a ridge. Fetterman and his men rushed in pellmell pursuit, right into a trap. The men at the Fort heard sudden, quick firing, followed by complete, sickening silence. An officer with fifty-four men hastened in the direction of the battle. They found the bodies of all eighty-one men dead on a hillside, their guns and bullets stolen. The Fetterman Massacre was a complete victory for the Indians.

In their triumph, the Sioux grew headstrong and more than a little rash. In August, 1867, Red Cloud decided to finish off the Fort. He had three thousand warriors, and he hurled them at the whites. Vastly outnumbered, the soldiers made a fortification of wagon-boxes set on their sides. They had plenty of rifles, some of them Springfield repeaters. The sharp-shooters crouched in safety behind the wagon-boxes, and carefully picked off the zig-zagging warriors as they tried to get inside the wall defense.

The Indians tried shooting fire arrows, to set the camp on fire. But there was little dry grass to burn, and most of the arrows hit only dust, doing no damage.

The charge paused, stopped, turned and fled. Only three white men had been killed, but the Soux had lost one thousand one hundred and thirty-seven. The Wagon-Box Fight had fully avenged the Fetterman Massacre.



PRISONERS FOR SACRIFICE

By WILLIAM KARNEY

The Aztec gods demanded human sacrifices!

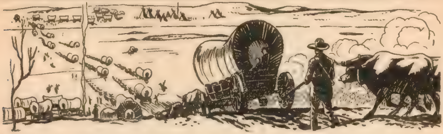
THE most unique form of warfare that has ever existed was a tradition among certain natives of Mexico at the time that country was explored by the famous Spanish adventurer, Cortez. Annual battles were fought for the sole purpose of obtaining victims for sacrifice.

The religion of the people demanded human sacrifices, in fact no other religion in the history of the world has ever used human sacrifices to the extent that the Aztecs did. Normally the people were gentle, kindly and gay, but their religion exacted atrocious cruelties and bloodshed. The victims of the sacrifice were originally prisoners of war. By the sixteenth century, however, when Cortez discovered these people, they were united under an empire of such power that there was seldom conflict between the various tribes and, consequently, the supply of victims procured through ordinary war was small.

An amazing plan was then put into operation by the Aztecs and their hereditary enemies, the Tlascalans. Each year, at a time and place agreed upon by the two tribes, an Aztec army met a Tlascalan army in a contest for prisoners to be used as sacrificial victims. No weapons were used, as it was not desired that wounds or death be inflicted. The two groups of warriors rushed together, and each man strove to capture some member of the opposing army. The field was a shouting, struggling, wrestling mass of fighting men until all became exhausted, and the two forces drew apart with the prisoners they had obtained.

The prisoners were then given a chance to avoid the fate for which they had been captured. Each one in turn was tied to a solid support by a chain around one ankle, and was then given a small wooden sword and a light shield. Thus lightly armed, he was forced to fight in quick succession six heavily armed soldiers. If, as occasionally happened, the prisoner defeated all of his opponents, he was set free, given many gifts, and sent home to his people. On the other hand, if he received the slightest wound, he knew it was his fate to be sacrificed.

Once their doom was sealed, the captives were usually willing victims. Believing deeply in the religious significance of the sacrifices, they felt that they were honored, and that their death would only lead them into eternal happiness. Their captors treated them with reverence, and heaped upon them every luxury and delicacy in their power. After a pleasant period of careful training, these men ascended the steps of the sacrificial pyramids as exalted in spirit as the old Christian martyrs.



FORDING THE SOUTH PLATTE

By ART FELMAN

River-crossing was rough in the old days . . .

NEXT to attacks by Indians, the most dreaded danger encountered by emigrants to the West was the fording of rivers. Some rivers on the most frequented trails were soon bridged, others could be ferried across, but some had to be forded by the teams and wagons loaded with the belongings of the pioneers.

The crossing of the South Platte River near Brule, Nebraska, was one such a dismaying ordeal, which must be undergone if the journey was to be completed. It was one of the dangers of the trail which could be definitely anticipated, and the travelers worried about it from the time they left home. The river was not bridged there for a long time, because of its great width, and the fact that there was not sufficient timber near at hand. It could not be ferried because of its many shallows and shifting sand bars.

Early small groups of fur traders and explorers solved the problem by making "bull boats" for themselves on the spot. They would kill a few large buffalo bulls, skin them, sew the hides together, and then stretch the fresh, wet hides over the bed of a cart, or over a framework made by driving the ends of several green willow poles into the ground. The hides soon dried and shrunk, and the resulting boat, shaped like a large kettle, could safely carry several men and their equipment across the river.

This method would not, of course, do for the emigrants, because they had their wagons to get across. Sometimes the wagon load was lightened, by packing some of it on animals, or sometimes several teams were hitched to one wagon.

The crossing at this particular place varied considerably in width from one week to the next, depending upon how much rain had fallen in the surrounding mountains in the days previous. Ordinarily, the water was not very deep, but there were holes which shifted in size and position, as did the numerous sand bars; and the current was powerful and insistent. The people had to take a chance on these perils, for they had to get across. Most of them made it safely, yet hardly a week went by without at least one fatal accident.

The load in the wagon would be carefully packed and everything loose anchored down firmly. The women gathered the children around them inside the wagon and sat tight-lipped and anxious. The driver took his place, and started the team. After balking at the bank, and at entering the water, they were forcibly urged to plunge into the swirling, muddy current.

Shouting, pulling at the reins, beating the team into action, the driver steered them diagonally across the river, to escape the worst of the force of the sand-laden, sweeping water. The pitfalls of grasping quicksand, unseen rocks, deep holes where it would seem for terrified minutes that disaster was certain, animals maddened with fear, were all gotten through somehow, and finally the panting horses, and the creaking wagon with its drenched occupants and contents, pulled up on the opposite bank.

MIRAGE

By JOSEPH KINGTON

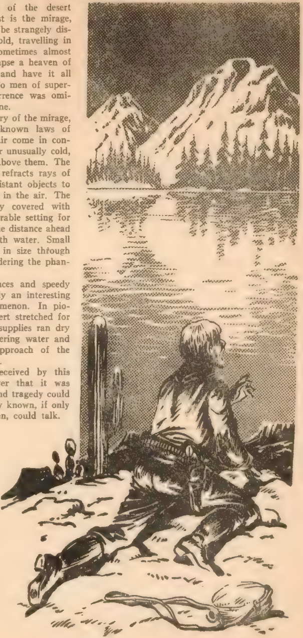
Nature's most vicious prank!

A FAMILIAR phenomenon of the desert country of the Southwest is the mirage, an optical illusion apt to be strangely disconcerting. To the pioneers of old, travelling in slow-moving caravan, it was sometimes almost unbearably disappointing to glimpse a heaven of green trees and shining water, and have it all disappear as they approached. To men of superstition and ignorance, the occurrence was ominous and a portent of evil to come.

Science has explained the mystery of the mirage, and we know it follows well-known laws of physics. When lower layers of air come in contact with ground unusually hot or unusually cold, they become denser than the air above them. The lower stratum then reflects and refracts rays of light and causes images of far distant objects to appear as in a mirror, suspended in the air. The wide, level desert, only sparsely covered with small bushes and cacti, is a favorable setting for a mirage. A slight depression some distance ahead may seem to be a lake filled with water. Small mesquite trees, greatly increased in size through the reflection, look like trees bordering the phantom lake.

In these days of short distances and speedy transportation, a mirage is merely an interesting and easily understandable phenomenon. In pioneer days, when the parched desert stretched for interminable lengths, and water supplies ran dry all too soon, the sight of shimmering water and green trees vanishing at the approach of the traveller was a veritable tragedy.

How often were travellers deceived by this apparent haven, only to discover that it was nothing? What tales of horror and tragedy could be written if only they were fully known, if only all the buried bones of dead men, could talk.



It was unbearably disappointing to see the almost perfect illusion of water—and then to . . .

HOW TOMBSTONE GOT ITS NAME

By MARTIN MANNING

Was ever a town more aptly named . . . ?

ONE autumn evening in 1849, the year of the gold rush, a hundred or so white-topped prairie schooners camped for the night in southwestern Utah. Bound for the California placer fields, the emigrants had learned that it was too late in the season for them to cross the Sierras by the northern route. They had engaged a Mormon guide to lead them over a vague, unmarked, southerly trail leading into Los Angeles. Now a man named Williams proposed a short cut, and drew a map to support his plan. A snow-clad mountain peak was an important landmark in this short route, as it was supposed to be visible for a good part of the journey. This night the party had to make the decision whether to follow their Mormon guide as originally planned, or to take the short cut in the hope that they could arrive at the gold fields more quickly. Scouts had been sent out to look over the country, and they were present at the momentous meeting. One after another the scouts reported, and each said that the short cut was impractical, as the country looked too rough.

One part of the group felt no hesitancy in making a decision. That was a number of young bachelors who called themselves the Jayhawkers. Having no responsibilities in the way of wives and children to consider, they were all for any short cut. One by one the others chose their course; nearly three-quarters of the band chose the unknown short cut. For many of them the decision to abandon the better known route was a fatal one, for the rest it led into incredible hardships and privations.

By the time they had traveled for three days they discovered that the Williams map was worthless. Where easy going had been promised, they found steep-walled canyons, naked cliffs, and sandstone pinnacles. Many of the drivers, then, turned back and joined the party who were being guided the surer way into Los Angeles. But twenty-seven wagons remained, still believing in a snow-clad landmark which would guide them westward. They sent out scouts, who reported a pass far to the north. The adventurous young Jayhawkers advised the men with families to return, and not tackle the unmapped wilderness with women and children. None would do so, and the expedition set forth in two sections, the twenty wagons of Jayhawkers, and seven wagons of family men.

For a few days the way was easy and pleasant. But gradually the country began to change. Grass was sparser, streams were smaller and farther apart. The earth was hard and dry, or there was no earth, but only a rubble of sharp rock fragments.

The people became weary, the oxen grew gaunt, from lack of food and drink and the hard trek over difficult terrain. They realized that they were in the presence of a desert when mirages began to torture them with visions of rippling water and deep, waving grass. Day after day led them deeper into a land of scorched, jagged ridges and mountains of dry, volcanic rock.

THEN one day a scout reported that a hundred miles or more in the west he had seen a shining, white mountain peak. Eyes brightened and steps grew quicker as hope returned. Now an argument arose as to which was the easiest way to reach the mountain. And some went one way and some another. Though the paths of the various divisions sometimes converged, they never again traveled as a united party.

They had now reached the hardest part of their torturous journey. The occasional water they found was a tepid, brackish fluid, or was undrinkable. Beds of rock salt covered the earth, hard, and supporting no growth which the oxen could eat. There were hills of shifting sand, sharp pinnacles of the white salt, mud flats cracked by the sun, and air as burning hot and dry as the desert earth.

It was more than human flesh and spirit could bear. One by one the dead were left behind. One by one the suffering oxen were killed for the life-giving shreds of meat left on their bones. As they came nearer to the snow-clad crest which had lured them forward, they saw with horror that its sides were bare of verdure and even of earth, and were so steep that they could not be climbed. Now their weary minds knew that they were in the valley of death. Death seemed the only solution to their predicament; death surrounded them.

Yet even as they felt themselves trapped in this burning pitfall, they made efforts to escape. Straggling members of the Jayhawkers finally made Los Angeles. Two wagon-loads from the family group had an especially sensational rescue. They were called the Bennett party, and included in their number were two young men named Manley and Rogers. These two had been among the scouts who were continually forging ahead of the wagons, striving to find the best routes for procedure. The Bennett party found a little spring, surrounded by a few thickets of coarse grass. Here life could be maintained temporarily, at least. From this place they tried escape time after time, always running into blind walls, then returning despairingly to their little water hole.

A COUNCIL was held, and Manley and Rogers were appointed to go ahead until they found

(continued on page 184)

Do Unseen Powers
Direct Our Lives?

ARE the tales of strange human powers false? Can the mysterious feats performed by the mystics of the Orient be explained away as only illusions? Is there an intangible bond with the universe beyond which draws mankind on? Does a mighty Cosmic intelligence from the reaches of space ebb and flow through the deep recesses of the mind, forming a river of wisdom which can carry men and women to the heights of personal achievement?

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(continued from page 182)

some route which the wagons could follow to safety. The meat from one of the few remaining oxen was sent with them, and the rest of the party stayed by the spring to wait their return, or to wait for death.

Manley and Rogers promised to return in fifteen days. But the days dragged into weeks, until more than a month had passed, and they had not come. The weary men and women made one more try to find a pass through the mountains. They succeeded only in reducing their feeble strength, and returned again to the spring. Then as their last faint hope they decided to abandon the wagons, make pack saddles from the tops of the prairie schooners, and go forward, somewhere, with only the oxen. They were working on the wagon tops one day, when they heard a shot. Manley and Rogers were hurrying toward them, leading a heavy-laden mule.

The two had surmounted incredible difficulties, crossing the Mojave Desert for two hundred and fifty miles, and finally reaching a ranch in the San Fernando Valley where they were given provisions for the return trip.

Revived by the food and water, and sure, now, of the way to safety, the pioneers placed the children and the supplies on the gaunt oxen and the mule, and set out.

It is said that as they reached the summit of the divide from where they could go downhill to the west, they stopped and looked back. As they gazed down into that sink, thousands of feet below them, one of the women waved her arm in farewell. "Death Valley, good-by!" she said. And the name was so appropriate that all of the survivors of that terrible journey called the place Death Valley, and it has never been given any other name.

. . . AND MORE

By MARTIN MANNING

There are a thousand different reasons . . .

A PERSISTENT prospector discovered the first outcropping of valuable ore, from which seed the city eventually grew. Murderous Apaches were the incentive for the remark that furnished the name for the raw mining camp which later became the city of Tombstone.

The prospector was Ed Schiefflin, who devoted many years of his life in constant searching for the treasures buried in the earth; who sought so long and so diligently that the craving to find that which he knew existed became a stronger power in his life than desire for riches ever could; and who finally achieved his ambition by discovering, in spite of tedium, danger and suffering, a large ore body of great richness.

It was the 1870's and the Apaches were marauding and killing white men continually. Southeastern Arizona was Apache-land, and savage chiefs led their warriors to lurk among the rocks ready to descend upon any traveler who might come into that country. Ranches in the region were held by constant vigilance; stages were guarded by soldier escort, yet hardly a month went by that there was not some desperate encounter with the Indians. Apache signal fires were a common sight on the mesas and ramparts of the region.

Into this perilous country, in 1877, came Ed Schiefflin, about thirty years old, tall, tanned, in patched clothes, and with the patience in his eyes that comes to men who spend years in solitary, steadfast wanderings in search of rich ore. He had earlier seen the foothills of the Mule Mountains, and had now returned to prospect the district, in spite of warnings as to its danger.

He came to the Brunckow house, the closest habitation he could find to the hills he wanted to explore. It would have been quick suicide to camp alone, and he must have a base to return to for protection at night from the Apaches. The men about the place advised him strongly against his proposed expedition, but his mind was made up. Each morning he rode forth on his mule into the hills, and each evening he returned to this house to cook his supper and roll up in his blankets in comparative safety.

The men at the Brunckow house took to making bets as to whether or not he would return on various evenings. When asked what he was hunting for, Schiefflin replied that he was just looking for stones. And an old-timer then made the remark which became famous, and named a town: "Keep on," he said, "and you'll be finding your tombstone out there some day."

The words remained in the prospector's memory, though they affected his movements not at all. And then one day he found the stones he was seeking, a little pile of silver ore beside the graves of two prospectors who had been killed by the Apaches several months before. Whoever had buried the bodies had not been interested enough in minerals to realize what the stones were. Schiefflin searched carefully and intently that day for the place from which the ore had been taken, and he was successful.

HE WORKED too late to return to the Brunckow house that night, and had to find a hiding place in which to spend the night. He passed the night safely, although he saw a band of Apaches who, fortunately, missed seeing him and went on. The next morning he found more of the valuable blackish rock, and was convinced that he had made a great discovery.

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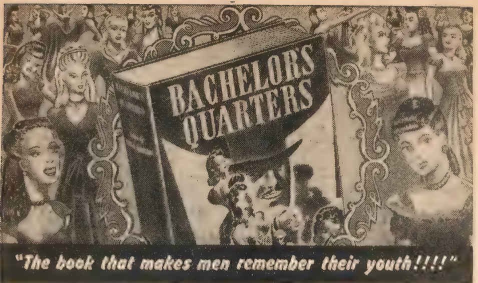
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He took his secret to his brother Al, and a friend, Dick Gird, who were highly excited at the find. The three spent the winter getting together a grubstake, and by the next spring were ready to stake out their claim. The Apaches were more bold and dangerous than ever, and the prospectors again made their permanent camp at the Brunckow house. Schiefflin guided his companions to his find, and they found the outcropping undisturbed. But on digging deeper into the rock, they found the stringer pinched out, and the claim not worth staking.

Undismayed, they searched further in the vicinity, and one day discovered a new outcropping. Their exploration work on this showed evidence of a large ore body, and fragments assayed thousands of dollars a ton. At last they staked their claim.

When it came to naming it, Ed Schiefflin remembered the dangers he had been through, and he remembered the words of the old-timer who had warned him of finding his own tombstone. In thankfulness that this was not the case, but that good fortune was with him, he named the claim the Tombstone, and thus it was recorded.

As the new camp grew, and became a place of rushing importance, the story was told and retold. When the time came to organize the mining camp into a municipality, the question of a name for the new town was decided without much debate. The great majority of the citizens favored the name of Tombstone. Thus was the tradition of that dangerous region placed upon the map of the West.

* * *

THE REBELLION OF COCHISE

By MARY L. McCARTHY

Cochise could take only so much — then . . .

FOR thirteen years a band of Apaches, under their chief, Cochise, roamed Arizona and New Mexico, making of the land a plunder ground into which travelers entered at their peril. The Indians had been properly settled on the reservation, and then Cochise rebelled at the trickery and injustice accorded them by the white men, and he led his people away. They reverted to the customs of their ancestors, making their living by theft and murder. Finally the diplomacy of a remarkable man of his enemies brought Cochise back under the rule of the white men, ending the bloodiest outbreak in the history of the Southwest.

Cochise had liked the life on the reservation, and had begun to assimilate some of the white man's ways. He soothed the warlike members of his tribe, and appeared to turn a deaf ear to the stories told him of the white man's treachery; but a man cannot hear such things often without beginning to believe a little.

A small matter came up concerning a white settler who had lost a cow and accused the Apaches of stealing it. Cochise and several minor chiefs were summoned into conference with a group of soldiers from the reservation, headed by an intolerant young second lieutenant fresh from West Point. The Indians, in their dignified, grave way, explained that they knew nothing about the cow or who had stolen the animal. The lieutenant fretted at the length of the Indians' speeches, and was consumed with his own arrogance and intolerance. He turned from the interpreter to his sergeant. "Arrest them all," he ordered.

Cochise had seen the growing impatience in the officer's eyes, and was remembering the stories his people had told him. When the quick order came, he understood, and slipped to the rear of the tent when the soldiers stepped forward. Unnoticed in the savage tumult which instantly arose as the chiefs battled the troopers who would imprison them, Cochise drew his knife, slit the canvas of the tent, and escaped into the night.

Now at last he believed every word which he had heard concerning the manner in which the white man's government wanted to treat the Indians. Now he was determined to join his uncle and other warrior chiefs who had previously deserted the reservation to live in freedom among the mountains they knew. But even more than these others, Cochise had a great resentment and desire for revenge, for he had sincerely tried to go along with the white men and conform to the ways they desired for him. Now in the instant of betrayal he was ready to revert to the way of life of his nomadic ancestors, who were past masters in the arts of ambush, raid and retreat, who had no love of home but made their lodges by spreading blankets or skins over the tops of bushes, to whom long marches were a habit, and bloody warfare an instinctive pleasure

QUICKLY, then, Cochise summoned his people, and when the government runners went to all parts of the reservation, they found no Indians anywhere. The Chiracahua Apaches, warriors, squaws, and children, were gone, riding hard toward the mountains to join the other renegade members of their tribe.

It was 1859, and in these days before the Civil War troops were being withdrawn from Arizona, and the Apaches found little hindrance to their warfare on the whites. They travelled far and wide, perfecting their methods of raiding ranches, ambushing wagon trains and stage coaches, and murdering prospectors.

During Civil War times they so devastated the ranches of the area that agriculture and cattle-raising ceased entirely. Travel through southeastern Arizona was suspended. Nearly every mine in that region was abandoned. The Butterfield stage line went out of business. Times were fat and good for the marauding, revengeful Apaches.

When the Civil War was ended, fresh troops came from the East and began pursuing the Indians relentlessly. The Apaches had been in the habit of alternating the long marches of their raids with rest periods high in the mountains, where they could fill their bellies and recuperate. The cavalry tracked them to these refuges, and either massacred whole bands or got them on the run again when they badly needed rest.

Cochise, then, had to change his tactics. He found a place high in the Dragoon Mountains which gave unlimited opportunity for hiding and ambush. To this day that region is known as Cochise's Stronghold. Here for some months the Indians were able to find rest after raids. Several hundred soldiers surrounded the place in a seige lasting several weeks, attempting to starve them out. But Cochise, adroit strategist that he was, managed to escape one dark night, leading two to three hundred men, women and children through the line of the besiegers. It was two days before the feat was discovered.

By that time the band was raiding again, along the headwaters of the San Pedro, replenishing their supplies of horses and other necessities. Cochise found other sanctuaries for his people, and mastered the art of flight as he had mastered the art of raiding. His feud became more remorseless and savage than ever.

THEN Captain Jonathan Jeffords decided to take a hand, and to visit Cochise in person. Jeffords owned a wagon train, which had suffered considerably from Apache raids (for which Jefford and his men had killed many Apaches), and he also worked with the government as messenger and scout. He knew the Apache customs and could speak their tongue and read their smoke signals. He found the camp of the renegades, and alone he walked into it.

First handing over his weapons as token of his good intentions, he conferred with Cochise, in the deliberate Indian fashion, for two or three days. By the end of that time the two men had made a pact, unheard of in those times, that each would respect the other's property and do no more killing of each other's men. The pact was kept, and Jefford occasionally visited the Indians again. He and Cochise became friends, and Jeffords got to know the chief well, his history, his grievances and his point of view.

About this time there was a change of command and General George Crook took charge of the Indian fighting operations. He understood the Indians, and was able to beat them at their own game of ambuscade, while at the same time thoroughly sympathizing with their cause. Crook was there to combat the savagery of the Apaches;

(Continued on page 188)

BONANZA

WHEN the Indians had, unwillingly, relinquished control of the West, the cattlemen moved in. For a period of about twenty years, from 1868 to 1886, they experienced a real bonanza of quick and fabulous returns for the money they invested. For the owners of the ranches, the life was a paradise.

The country was big, the grass was thickly luxuriant, water was abundant. The range was free to all. A small starting capital soon paid interest of thirty, fifty, even seventy-five percent.

All a man needed was a few corrals, one or two bunkhouses, a ranch house, a field of hay to cut for the work stock in the winter, some experienced cowboys, and as large a starting herd as he could manage. Then the cattle were turned loose on the vast open range, and seen only twice a year, spring and fall. In the spring the calves were branded, and so great was the increase that the herd almost doubled itself each year. In the fall, new calves were branded again, and the beef was cut out to be shipped.

The profits were astronomical. A Texas steer which cost five dollars, delivered, sold in three years for forty-five dollars. A bonanza had been discovered, a speculation that turned out to be incredibly lucky. The great days of the open range were in full swing.

The cattlemen came to the West from all over the world. From New York and Boston, England, France, Scotland, came adventurous young men, under the impetus of youth, the glamour of a new country, and the promise of easy money. There were also a number of sober, experienced cowmen, making the most of an unusual opportunity.

What a life these remarkable fellows led! Having established operations, the young lords of the manor had little to do except share in the glamour, and spend the money. They would arrive at the town nearest their ranch in the early spring, spend a week or two renewing acquaintances with others of their kind, then ride off to the ranches. There, they rode like princes at the head of their cowboys on the spring roundup. After a month or two at the ranch, they would go back to their club in town for a pleasant, leisurely, social summer vacation. In the fall, it was back to the ranches for some hunting, the autumn beef roundup, and to collect a big check. Then to the club for a week of reunion, before going East or to Europe for the winter.

1886 was the last year of the great bonanza. For many years the winters had been mild. That winter, and the next, there were great blizzards, deep snows, and intense cold, and whole herds of cattle were destroyed. Homesteaders had begun to fence in the land. Men of all kind were pushing into the range country, speculators, bad men, businessmen, ranchers by the score. The prosperous, glorious days of the open range were over.

* * *

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at the same time General O. O. Howard was sent by President Grant to use diplomacy in getting the Indians back on their reservation.

General Howard decided he would go to see the great chief. His scouts told him that Jeffords was the only man who could locate the Indians and take the General to them. Jeffords was called in, and consented to go, providing no escort of soldiers went along. So the two men, with a single aide, journeyed into the mountains.

They came into the camp of the savages, and they conferred with Cochise. The fact that the general was an envoy of the great white father in Washington, and that Jeffords vouched for that envoy, had great weight with Cochise. General Howard said that the President wanted peace, to have the Indians back on the reservation, and to treat them fairly.

THE deliberations were leisurely, as was the Indian custom, but the white men dared not let them drag out too long, lest a searching expedition be sent out. Cochise agreed to take his people back to the reservation, on certain conditions. He named the region where they wanted to live, and he asked that the agent be Captain Jeffords.

General Howard accepted the stipulations at once; but Captain Jeffords was somewhat taken aback. Friendly as he felt toward the Apaches, he still had his own business, and it would mean a considerable financial loss to him to become an Indian agent.

But Cochise had had enough experience with dishonest officials to want to be sure this time who would have authority over his people. Jeffords, then, finally consented, with some provisions of his own that no other white men should come into the Indian territory, and that he should have absolute judgment on all matters. This was agreed, and the President later confirmed the promises. And so, in the later part of 1872, Cochise and his people returned to the reservation.

Cochise and Jeffords worked together and maintained peace and harmony among the Indians under their control, without the political interference and injustice which had been the previous lot of these Apaches.

* * *

TEXAS BILL LONGLEY

By MILTON MATTHEWS

A killer can't escape the noose forever

TEXAN Bill Longley began his gunslinging career at the age of sixteen. That was in 1866, when the ending of the Civil War left the country filled with resentments and persecutions. Bill heard a Negro cursing white men of the neighborhood, and when his father's name was mentioned, the youngster's hands moved to his Colts. The Negro's rifle spoke, but too late; a bullet from Bill Longley's gun went through his head. In the next eleven years, Bill is said to have killed thirty-one more men.

Son of a Texas pioneer, he was the product of his environment, and of an era which demanded fiery independence in action and thought. He had a magnificant physique, tall and well proportioned, and amazing, keen black eyes. These, with his courage and his remarkable skill with guns, made him outstanding in his day. Destiny led him into a life as an adventurer, a hell-for-leather fighting man excelled by none.

In the months following Bill Longley's first fatal shooting, he killed several other Negroes, and his name became a word of terror to the black men of the area. But a posse came for him, and Longley fled. Mistaken for another man, some Federal soldiers pursued him, and Longley killed one of them before escaping. Now the law was after him in earnest, and from then until his death, Longley was a hunted man.

On one occasion, still before his seventeenth birthday, he was almost hanged. He had made friends with a young horse thief, and was spending the night with him. Some vigilantes chose that night to surround the cabin. The two boys were captured and taken out to be executed. Unobserved by anyone, however, a small brother of Johnson, the horse thief, followed the party. As the vigilantes, assuming their work completed, rode away leaving the two boys dangling from ropes, they fired a parting salute. A bullet went through Longley's rope, and that, together with his weight of some two hundred pounds, parted the strand and Bill dropped to the ground. The small boy raced forward and cut the noose, to save his life. Johnson was dead.

Bill Longley then joined the Baker gang, a desperate band of cutthroats who were waging guerrilla warfare against Negroes, carpet-baggers, and Northern sympathizers. Soon tiring of this, he went back to his home town of Evergreen, but discovered that his life there would be that of the hunted wolf. He decided to move north.

HE BECAME a cowboy for a time, but he seemed magnetized for trouble. Several killings are credited to him in this period of his life. More than once he was caught and imprisoned, but always he managed to escape and be on his swaggering way, hands always ready to use his Colt thunderbolts. He lived for a year with the Snake Indians, enjoying the wild, free life for a time.

Homesickness for Texas took him back toward Evergreen. On the way, he got into a card game with a young man named Stuart. There was a quarrel, and Stuart reached for his gun. That was a fatal act, for Longley had a strong instinct for self-preservation, and his speed on the draw was unmatched. Stuart's father offered a fifteen hundred dollar reward for the capture of his son's killer. Longley developed a plan, and found two men to help him with it. Teh men tied Longley and delivered him to the law. Stuart, senior, paid out the reward money and left. Then out came the guns of the two helpers, and as the sheriff stared, openmouthed and helpless, Longley was freed, handed the fifteen hundred, which he divided then and there among the three of them, who then rode off, leaving the sheriff locked in the cell which had just released Longley.

After another escapade or two, Longley returned to Texas, and his father's farm. Pursuit was too near for comfort there, however, and he had to keep moving. He had plenty of friends to keep him informed of the activities of the law. In his middle twenties by now, he had a reputation as a gunfighter without peer. Now and then he would settle down to a job for a while, but would have to move on when pursuit of him became too warm, or when a new killing made things unpleasant.

A cousin of his was reported to have been killed by one Wilson Anderson. Longley went back to Evergreen to ask Anderson about this. The interview ended in Anderson's death.

Longley, calling himself William Jackson, got a job as a farmhand in Louisiana, just over the line from Texas. He became known in the neighborhood as a quiet, likable fellow, and a great friend of Constable Courtney, whom he occasionally aided in making arrests. One day the Constable was reading descriptions of wanted criminals, and noted that the description of "the most desperate criminal in the Southwest" fitted Bill Jackson exactly.

HARDLY believing it possible that this friend of his could be the notorious killer Bill Longley, Courtney investigated. He exchanged letters with Sheriff Mast in Texas, and they arranged to surprise Longley. Courtney went into the field where Bill was hoeing corn, and told him he wanted his help in arresting a Negro. Bill had done this before, and suspected nothing. As they came into the yard, the two Texas officers stepped foreward with pistols drawn, and Courtney rammed his own gun into Longley's shoulders. It was June, 1877.

Longley was tried for Wilson Anderson's murder. He was sentenced to hang. On the day of his execution, October 11, 1878, there were close to a hundred guards about the scaffold. Longley had so many friends and sympathizers, that an attempt to rescue him was expected. However, none came, and Longley, for the second time in his twenty-seven years, felt the noose about his neck. This time he did not escape.

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BILLY THE KID

By MILDRED MURDOCH

There was no end to Billy the Kid's exploits — he was bad clear through!

WILLIAM BONNEY, better known as "Billy the Kid," was born in a New York slum. When he was very young, his parents moved West, and in Silver City, New Mexico, where his mother had a boarding house, young Billy learned the ways of the frontier. He learned to gamble, and to swear, he learned about the saloons and other joints in the town, and he learned to use guns. Early knowledge of gunplay was a necessity in the sixties and seventies, and killing was considered a natural incident to any quarrel. Billy, the youngster, absorbed all these things, and this knowledge, together with an uncontrollable temper, prepared him for his short and violent career.

When only twelve years old, he rushed to the aid of a friend who was being attacked, and killed the attacker with his pocket knife. From then on, he lived the life of an outlaw, and became the most noted killer in the Southwest. In that wide, free country, and in that era of history, a famous desperado was somewhat of a personage, respected and feared for gunplay and daring, held in a sort of honor as one who was master of a vigorous and perilous environment. Added to these things, the Kid had a likeable personality, with a careless gaiety and sociability that made him many friends. He never carried on his banditry alone, but always as one of a group, and sometimes he was the leader of the gang.

For half a dozen years after his first killing, Billy led a wandering, colorful life. Several murders are attributed to him in this period. He spent some time in Mexico when Arizona became too hot for him, then came back into Texas and New Mexico. With some pals he rustled stock, stole horses, and got involved in the famous Lincoln County War. He made his headquarters at Fort Sumner where he drank, gambled and danced away the money he acquired from rustling.

The governor of New Mexico, trying to achieve peace and tranquillity in his state, knew that this would never come about as long as the Kid was free to continue his depredations upon the ranches. Rustling led to killings, and one killing inevitably led to others. He prevailed upon the young desperado to come in and talk to him. He promised that if Billy would stand trial, and be convicted, he would then pardon him. In March, 1879, when nineteen years old, Billy the Kid was arrested. He pleaded not guilty to two murders which were charged to him. He managed somehow to get out of jail, and never went on trial. He and his gang continued their raiding. By this time his reputation was such that it would be a great thing for any enemy who could kill him. Billy increased his alertness, suspiciousness, and his quickness on the trigger. He had a good many notches on his gun by now.

THE fall that Billy was twenty, Pat Garrett was elected sheriff of Lincoln County, New Mexico. By this time a great many leading men of the area had decided that conditions were intolerable, and that something had to be done about the Kid and his cattle thievery. Garrett received all the cooperation he wanted, and he really began to hound the Kid.

After several close calls, finally at dawn one day he caught up with the Kid, who was holed up in an old stone house with four other men. A man came out of the house in the gray morning light, and seven shots came from the waiting posse. They had thought it was the Kid himself, but it turned out to be a man named Bowdre. The other rustlers remained out of sight. Then, Garrett saw movement in one of the ropes tying the bandits' horses at the door of the house. With one shot, he dropped one horse dead in the doorway. With other shots, he severed the ropes tying the other horses.

The bad men now had little chance. There was considerable banter back and forth between the besieged men and the posse. The day wore on uneventfully, until the posse built a fire and began to make coffee and fry bacon. The fragrant odors had an immediate effect on the surrounded men. They called out that they would surrender, if guaranteed protection from mob violence. Given this assurance, the four men walked out with their hands up.

The Kid was sent to Mesilla for trial. He was charged with one murder, but the attorney assigned to defend him brought up a technicality, and the indictment was quashed. He was immediately charged with another murder, and this time he was tried and found guilty. He was sentenced to be taken to Lincoln and hanged.

At the Lincoln jail he was kept in chains and guarded by two men. Yet he managed to kill both of his guards and escape. Singing, whistling, yelling like a maniac, he rode out of town on a stolen horse, carrying a rifle and two revolvers.

PAT GARRETT heard the news of the Kid's escape the next day, and he methodically proceeded to pick up the trail again. For two months he pursued the vagrant criminal. The Kid never left the neighborhood, but was fed and sheltered by men and women who felt loyalty toward him, and also fear. In the evening of July 13, 1881, Garrett rode into Fort Sumner to have a talk with a stockman, Pete Maxwell. He had a feeling that the Kid was around town somewhere and thought Maxwell might help him.

It was near midnight, and Maxwell was in bed. Garrett entered the dark room and sat by the bedside. He trusted Maxwell, but he knew that the Kid had a strange effect upon these people who knew him best. He asked Maxwell if he knew where the Kid was. "Where he is at the moment, I can't say," was Maxwell's somewhat evasive reply.

Just then a figure entered the room, gun in hand. In the dimness, none of the men could see the others plainly. "Who are the men outside?" said the man with the gun, to Maxwell. Then he realized someone was sitting by the bed. He raised his pistol.

Maxwell gasped to Garrett "It's him!" Garrett, expecting a shot any moment, drew his own gun and fired at the Kid. And so the Kid died, with a gun in his hand, for once having let someone else beat him to the first shot. He is credited with having killed twenty-one men, and he was only twenty-one years old at his death.

WESTERN LEGEND

BY MOSS MICHAELS

ONE OF the super-gunmen of all time was Wild Bill Hickok. In the wildest, most romantic period of the West, he was one of the leading characters. He knew dangerous Indian fighting; Abilene in its greatest year as the end of the Texas trail drives; Deadwood, most lawless of wild mining camps. He was famous throughout the country, a personage of the times, because of his speed with weapons in an era when gun-fighting played an important part in most every life, and because of his dash and daring and colour. While he was alive the stories of his feats were told throughout the West; after his death he became a legend.

He was born in Illinois, and went to Kansas in 1855, when he was eighteen. Kansas still was rough, frontier country, and young Bill engaged in a variety of occupations—bodyguard to a general, constable, stage-driver, scout during the Civil War. His reputation grew throughout the area, until he was known far and wide as a gun-fighter of unusual ability, braveness, coolness, and efficiency. Somewhere along the line he acquired the nickname "Wild Bill," which stuck to him for the rest of his life. After the War, he continued working for the Government as an Indian scout, and was considered one of the most valuable men on the Plains.

By 1869 the menace of the red man was diminished somewhat, and a new era had set in, the period of the great trail drives up from

(Continued on page 192)

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(Continued from page 191)

Texas. Wild Bill played a leading part in the wild, turbulent life of the times. He was elected sheriff of a Kansas country, and headquartered at the town of Hays. This was a typical frontier town, where tough cowboys, freighters and soldiers came to drink and gamble and celebrate. They were all hard men who fought often, and fought to kill. Anyone who kept even moderate order must be a very hard man, himself.

Wild Bill's reputation helped him; the average tough was apt to be nervous at facing the terrible Wild Bill. Though he liked to have others impressed by his prowess, he was no swaggering bully by any mean. He was quiet and courteous, but constantly watchful and alert for trouble, as a man must be in those days when the split second of the draw often meant the difference between life and death.

After a time, Hickok moved on to Abilene. For a while he made his living as a gambler, and, in 1871, was made marshall. The town existed in the midst of a sea of Texas longhorns; it was the end of the trail for dozens of herds. The cowhands who had made the hard drive found needed change and relaxation at the Alamo, the Bull's Head, the Longhorn, and many another saloon. Lights blazed all night, and there was much raucous hilarity, and frequent gunfights. Those Texans didn't know what a fist fight was—their differences were settled with blazing guns. Wild Bill, tall, handsome, with golden-brown hair hanging to his shoulders, moved through Abilene, or sat at the gambling tables of the Alamo, eyes alert for trouble, hands ready for his guns.

AFTER about a year as marshall, Hickok again moved on. He wandered about for a while, and spent some time touring with Buffalo Bill's show. Then he became interested in the Black Hills, which were just opening up to miners. He and a partner went to Deadwood, and began developing claims. The rumor went around that he was going to be made marshall of that lawless camp. The underworld element was much disturbed by this talk, as they were in their heyday, and did not like the thoughts of having to face Wild Bill as an officer of the law. It did not happen, but Hickok nevertheless managed to uphold his reputation as a fearless, dashing gunman.

He entered a saloon one day which happened to be filled with the worst bad men of the town. He sized up the situation and proceeded to make a speech. "I hear you've been talking about me," he said, "telling around what you plan to do to me. Well, that's all! If I hear any more such talk, any of you that's left can plan to attend a bunch of cheap funerals. Now, lineup, every one of you tinhorn hoodlums! I'll take care of your artillery." And line up they did, while Wild Bill took their guns and walked out!

The leaders of the Deadwood toughs worked

(Continued on page 194)

(BACK COVER)

HOPI SNAKE DANCE

Repelling—and fascinating — is this weird Indian dance!

IN northern Arizona, amidst the lonely cliff-perched dwellings, the Hopis, the Navajos, and even some of the Apaches conducted one of the most weird tribal dances ever recorded. Even today these dances, almost unmodified, are continued.

Days before any dances are to begin, large numbers of snakes must be rounded up. They are caught—the poisonous rattlers at least—by tickling them into running motion with a blessed eagle's feather. Once in motion, the lightning-fast Indian scoops them by the back of the neck into his snake-gathering sack, where they are carried to the ceremonial ground and thoroughly cleansed in clean sand.

While blacksnakes, king snakes, and a host of other kinds are used, the prevailing type is the dreaded and poisonous rattler. The fangs are not extracted from the snakes and the dances are conducted in full knowledge of this.

When the dances begin, the Indians take the snakes in their mouths, and holding them between their teeth, to the weird chant of tribal music, they begin the incredible ceremony. There is a strict and complicated ritual followed, a ritual that is never deviated from. It consists of elaborate steps and hops.

What an impossible sight that is! As many as a hundred Indians dancing in wild abandon, each with a deadly rattler between his jaws, carries on his age-old practice. Here and there a man will bite too hard on his snake's body. The rattler will become angry, thresh about and strike—perhaps on a soft cheek. Involuntarily, the Indian's jaws will open, the snake will drop and be left hanging from the man's face by his fangs! In spite of the terrific jolt of venom that enters the dancer, he will act as if nothing happened and the dance will at once proceed without interruption.

How this is possible, we do not know. Theoretically, the man should die, because no especial pains are taken to remove the venom, such is the faith of the snake-dancers.

Prior to the dance, the participants drink a special bitter herb tea, the Mah-que-be, a precious, secret drink whose formula is never divulged. This is to guarantee immunity from the venom—and apparently it does.

The ways of Indians are strange. But regardless of the truth or falsity of their beliefs we cannot but acknowledge their courage in such a bold and dreadful ceremony.

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(Continued from page 192)

harder than ever to develop anti-Hickok sympathy. And they took a man named Jack McCall, kept him drunk, and primed him to kill Hickok, telling him what a great man he would be considered, should he get rid of the famous gunman. McCall was just an unimportant bum, who spent his time carousing in the toughest dives in town, and he made a willing tool.

It was the afternoon of August 2, 1876. Wild Bill was playing poker in a saloon. Contrary to his usual habits, he sat with his back to the open door. It was his custom never to turn his back to anyone; but on this occasion his friends laughed at him when he wanted to change his seat, and he remained where he was. Jack McCall came in. No one paid much attention to him as he moved up to watch the game. Hickok was looking down at his hand—he had two pair, aces and eights. Suddenly, McCall's Colt roared, and Hickok slumped to the floor, still holding his cards.

McCALL backed out of the room, covering the other men in the saloon with his gun, and ran for his pony. But his saddle slipped, and McCall fell, then raced down the street. He was pursued and dragged back, where he narrowly escaped immediate lynching. A frontier court was formed, and McCall was tried for the murder. The verdict was "not guilty." Apparently the jury was chosen by the men who engineered Hickok's assassination.

McCall went to Custer City and continued his drinking career. But he boasted too often about the killing, and in October, 1876, he was arrested by a United States marshall. He was tried in a regular court in Yankton, South Dakota, and this time he was convicted and sentenced to death in one day's time. He was hanged in March, 1877.

Wild Bill Hickok was buried in Deadwood, and the legend of his life began to be told. Several years after his death a life-sized statue was placed upon his grave, from which many pieces have been chipped by people who wanted some souvenir of the West that used to be. Wild Bill became a symbol in popular imagination of that West.

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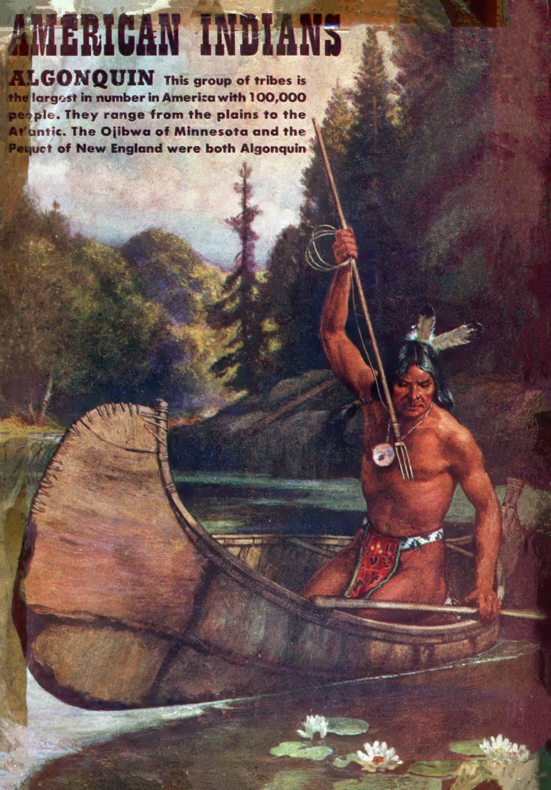

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